

Fashionista

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Wanna-be investigative journalist Matoi Ryuko finds herself surrounded by all sordid secrets she could ever wish for as she takes up a new project on Harime Nui and her prize model Kiryuin Satsuki. Will Ryuko charge forward to unravel the dangerous secrets of the Kiryuin family, or will she set aside her nature to protect newfound love? AU. Cover image by janewithawhy.

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Chapter 1

This will possibly be as cliché as hell...

Nine years ago:

Her father had told her to take the metro to school, that she was old enough now to go by herself. In denial, Matoi Ryuko squashed the trepidation in her heart and boarded with a forced swagger, her senses taking in her surroundings with the hyper-sensitivity of the nervous mind.

As usual, the public transport was dirty and noisy, and Ryuko looked around for a seat near a window, her mind filled with those bizarre fantasies one gets when surrounded by unfamiliar people - those fantasies about overcoming the social norm of perfectly articulate silence and striking up an outlandish and meaningful conversation with a mysterious but friendly stranger. She knew that the odds of such an experience were slim, but she was still young enough to believe in such magic, so she sat carefully next to a girl with sleek black hair who looked about her age, swinging her satchel full of books to rest on her lap and turning to study the girl silently.

Her eyes were sunken and staring, ringed with black, but she was otherwise flawlessly beautiful, her features sharp and unusually developed for a girl her age. Ryuko felt that the "mysterious" criteria of her public-transport daydream was sufficiently fulfilled, and so she puffed out her chest and steeled herself for the insane venture she was about to take, a feat comparable to talking on an elevator.

"Hi," she blurted, a little too loudly, "I'm Ryuko." She knew she should say something else, something to break the ice, but the silence had stretched on too long and her fear began to swallow her as the girl jumped and turned to look at her. She appeared to wrestle between exhaustion and disdain and an ironclad sense of

appropriate behavior for the well-mannered. The latter must have won out, for she smoothly extended a hand and whispered in a hoarse voice.

"Satsuki. The pleasure is mine."

Ryuko gulped and took her hand, shaking it roughly.

"I'm going to school." she divulged hastily, regretting her commitment to the ongoing conversation. Satsuki looked like she didn't want to be disturbed, and the intensity of her gaze was making Ryuko nervous. "Where are you going?" she croaked, resolving to leave her seat-mate alone after the current exchange.

"Nowhere."

Ryuko blinked, surprised, but she had already resigned herself to silence, so she nodded and smiled awkwardly before turning away. Shame burned in her face and she faked a yawn so she had an excuse to put her head down on the bag on her knees to hide her redness. Normally she would have shrugged away her trepidation and barreled onwards, but something about the way that girl looked at her made her sad and nervous, and in her embarrassed contemplation of the stout weave of her backpack, Ryuko quickly fell asleep.

She awoke in a panic, scrambling to get a grasp on her hazy mind, smacking her head violently against something hard that shifted with a cry and a thump. She quickly realized that she had jammed her head against the elbow of the person sitting next to her, sending said person flying into the shifting, corrugated aisle of the metro.

"Holy hell, I'm sorry," she shouted, her voice sticky and her teeth tasting like nap. Even as she stood to help her seat-mate, her eyes frantically searched for some sign that she hadn't missed her stop. She had. By at least forty minutes. "Damn it," she growled before reaching for the girl she had pushed over. To her surprise, it was still

Satsuki. "You're still here," Ryuko said, trying to mask her rude tone and placing a hand on the other girl's shoulder.

Satsuki resisted the touch with such violence that she knocked herself back onto hands and knees. All her weight rested on one hand that trapped her hair against the floor, and she groaned as she frantically tried to lift her head but was stopped by her own hair. A few seconds was all she needed to compose herself, but she still looked flustered as she lowered herself into her seat next to a thoroughly confused Ryuko.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Ryuko kept muttering, holding her hands out in case they were needed but hovering awkwardly to avoid another spastic scene. Satsuki tucked her mussed hair behind her ears and closed her eyes for a few seconds, easing her breathing.

"No, no, it's quite all right. I'm sorry. I don't mean to alarm you." Ryuko breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in her seat.

"Damn," she muttered again, raking a hand through her messy black hair "I missed my stop." Satsuki cocked her head at Ryuko.

"That's too bad. Would you like me to call you a cab?" Satsuki asked, clearly trying to make amends for her odd behavior. Still, Ryuko stared at her curiously. A cab? Call her a cab? Ryuko wondered if she had seriously misjudged the age of the girl sitting next to her. She didn't look much older than fifteen, but her cadence and phrasing suggested she was much older.

"How old are you?" Ryuko blurted out before immediately blushing. Satsuki stared, then laughed softly.

"I'm fourteen." Ryuko cocked an eyebrow but said nothing, choosing instead to answer the previous question.

"Nah, I'll just ride back to my stop. Well..." she looked at her watch, "I guess I'll just go home." Eyeing Satsuki carefully, but judging the ice to be sufficiently broken, Ryuko abruptly asked, "Why are you

going nowhere? I mean, everyone has to be going somewhere, don't they?"

The humor left Satsuki's eyes and she leaned back against the undoubtedly disgusting seat back.

"I can't go home." she whispered. "I can't take any more." Ryuko twiddled her thumbs, not knowing what to say. Her teachers had always talked in whispers about kids who had problems at home, but she had never encountered an example. Frankly, she was at a loss for words.

"Wanna come have lunch with me?" she asked. Satsuki's mouth dropped open, but, having talked herself out of a legitimate excuse, agreed. Something in Satsuki's better judgment twinged about going home with a stranger, but violent memories kept her from believing that some remote, uncertain evil could be worse than one so close at hand.

As best they could, the two girls chatted amiably through the remainder of the ride.

"Dad! I'm home!" Ryuko called as she stepped in the door, ushering her new friend inside. "I missed my stop and I brought a friend for lunch!"

From his desk, Matoi Isshin sighed and shook his head. Creakily standing, he refrained from berating his daughter in front of whatever stray she had found and shuffled into the kitchen.

"Fine, but you'll have to make sandw-" He stopped suddenly, his voice choking in his throat as he laid eyes on Satsuki. Nervously, she held her own hands and bowed.

"Good to meet you, Dr. Matoi. I'm Kiryuin Satsuki."

Ryuko watched in utter surprise and intense adolescent embarrassment as her father's eyes reddened and filled with tears. Furiously he wiped them away, only barely keeping himself from rushing to take now very uncomfortable Satsuki into his arms. Drawing himself up to his full (if stooped) height, he forced a trembling frown and pointed to the door.

"Young lady!" He boomed. "You will leave my house immediately! Go home!" Frightened and hurt, Satsuki rushed to do as she was told, barely giving Ryuko a glance.

"Dad!" Ryuko screamed as the door slammed shut.

"No, Ryuko!" he shouted back, his voice so powerful and serious that it stopped any thought of protest in his daughter's mind. Her chin trembling, Ryuko rushed to her room, slamming and locking the door behind her.

Dr. Matoi Isshin sank to the floor and cried.

Satsuki wandered the streets, exhausted. She had run from Ryuko's house with unashamed fervor, bowling over indignant sidewalk-users left and right. She had only stopped when her trembling legs refused to carry her anymore. After a short rest she had gotten up to wander, the churning inside her keeping her from being still.

A soft wind lifted her hair as she concentrated on her feet, trying to make them take her to a safe place without her knowing where that was. She shut her eyes for a mere second, closing out the world around her.

She jumped as a tiny hand threaded its icy fingers through hers. Her attempts to extricate herself resulted only in a bone-crushing force on her hand. Satsuki jittered in place, refusing to look at the little girl who had materialized beside her.

"Where ya been, Kiki?" The little blond asked in a high-pitched whine as she reached her free hand up to casually stroke Satsuki's hair.

"Nowhere," the taller girl muttered, still tugging uselessly at her hand.

"Well, mama wants you home. We've been worried about you. Honestly, you're lucky I found you first."

Satsuki grimaced, resisting the urge to dig her heels into the ground. The blond made several small *tsk* sounds, wagging her finger under Satsuki's nose.

"You're in such a bad part of town, too, and so far away! Were you trying to run away, Kiki? Mommy won't be happy to hear that, and she's already mad! What's she gonna do when I tell her you were trying to run away?"

"I wasn't running, Nui," Satsuki mumbled, a frustrated growl beginning to rise in her voice.

"It'll sure look that way when I tell Mom how you kicked and screamed when I tried to bring you home." Malice glowed from Nui's huge purple eyes as her mouth turned into a smug, close-lipped smile.

"What do you want?"

"Silly big sister. I just want to play with you!"

hmm... Not sure if I like third person omniscient... *shrug.* Stay tuned!

Chapter 2

Present day:

Matoi Ryuko quickly flashed her press badge to the unnecessarily massive security guard barring her way. Raking her hand through her shock of red-dyed and unruly hair, she braced herself for an hour or two of extreme annoyance.

What she wanted was to be an investigative journalist, to ask all the right questions and learn all the little secrets that lead up to a massive cathartic break into the respective yet equally sordid realms of business and crime. Since she was in high school she had been picking up her own private little investigations, pestering her father and prodding at her friends for a constant stream of information. Always in the back of her mind she had hoped little puzzle pieces would fall together to form one surprising and coherent whole, but always her imagination was disappointed.

Ryuko shook her head and sighed. Her life seemed to be a constant stream of disappointments. Her degree in journalism wasn't enough to get her a job as a bloodhound, and so she had to choose between transferring to the fast-food industry to pay the bills and taking a job as a low-level reporter for a squalid little fashion magazine run by a tiny, crotchety, pink-haired troll doll.

She had chosen the latter, though it had been a seriously considered decision.

Somehow, Ryuko's editor had an in with the Kiryuin family (she suspected it had something to do with blackmail or drugs). The Kiryuins, owners of the REVOCS corporation, had always been prominent in the fashion industry, supplying material and designs to nearly every clothing company in the world, but never before now had they ever been so prominent in the eyes of the public.

Part of must have been Harime Nui's (the second daughter of REVOCS' CEO Ragyo Kiryuin) rise to power as the youngest designer to ever attain the title of Grand Couturier. Her designs were fascinating in their boldness and scope, breaking genre boundaries as easily as a bad television program breaks the fourth wall. Often fashion magazines worldwide would sport designs smacking of both traditional Lolita and the sharp edginess of modern Goth (or some other such seemingly absurd combination), covers screaming the name of Harime Nui.

However, Ryuko suspected that perhaps the greater part of the world's new fascination with the Kiryuin name had more to do with Harime's sister and exclusive model, Kiki. Hers was the type of beauty that preoccupied the world so greatly it never even thought to demand a real name. Somewhere, somehow, little pockets of people floated about who knew Kiki's name, but no one cared. They simply wanted to gape at her in awe as she demurely allowed her face and body to be put on display for the sake of fashion.

Ryuko could appreciate an exquisite supermodel as well as the next person, but something about Kiki made her subconscious squirm as it thrashed around looking for some piece she was missing. There was something familiar she couldn't pin down in her mind, and it frustrated her to no end. It was the for slim chance of meeting Kiki in person that Ryuko had agreed to do this atrociously long interview with Harime. Otherwise, she would have told editor Jakuzare to go do horrible things to herself, for although Nui's artistry was fresh and compelling, she was sweetly and agonizingly annoying.

Unbelievably annoying.

As she thought about the horrors that awaited her, Ryuko began to regret agreeing to do the interview as she sat in a weird-smelling room waiting to be received. She had always been sensitive to high-pitched noises, and she protectively cupped her hands over her ears, grimacing, as she thought of Nui's dog-whistle squeak.

Damn it, she thought, I don't get paid enough for this .

"Miss Nui will see you now," a faceless assistant announced, shoving Ryuko unceremoniously into the designer's suite. Ryuko shook her head and steeled her gut, absentmindedly fingering the recorder in her pocket. She looked around at the atrociously pink decor of the main room, searching for but not finding her interviewee. *That's so strange, I could have sw...*

"Hey there, cutie," said a voice directly into her ear. Harime Nui had materialized behind her and casually draped her slender arms over Ryuko's blazer. The journalist jumped visibly, feeling as though her stomach had been slung into her lungs. She gulped as she tried desperately to keep her instinctive body from throwing punches. *Was she hiding behind the door?* Using every bit of restraint she had, Ryuko turned and extended a hand.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," she said in her "professional" voice, "I'm Matoi Ryuko from *Hiss*. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Ohmm?" Nui hummed, sounding like a mosquito as she rocked back and forth on her perilously high heels. "Questions? Of course! Anything for you, Ryuko!" Ryuko drew upon her years of customer service college jobs to spit out a smile to mask her surprise. Harime Nui wasn't just annoying, she was *off-putting*, creepy, almost. Said designer grabbed Ryuko's hand like they were in grade school and dragged her to a small table that looked like it was designed for either a small girl or a very old woman, lace doilies and all. She sat Ryuko down and sat across from her, placing her hands on her lap and leaning in close, her eyes unblinking.

Ryuko shuffled the papers she was holding, looking for the pre-written questions she had prepared as she absently murmured polite small-talk. She looked up to begin the interview, but the look she was being given made her freeze, comments on the weather dying awkwardly on her lips. The tiny fashionista looked like she was undressing Ryuko with her eyes, and not politely, either. Her huge, purple eyes were dilated with an expression of lust the young

reporter was not unfamiliar with, and her small, neat hands twitched as if she was tearing at Ryuko's clothes in her mind.

Ryuko blanched and stuttered, briefly losing her cool.

What the fuck? she thought, setting her papers down and raking both hands through her hair. Nui's eyes followed her every move. *It's only an hour, deal with it*. Coughing uncomfortably, Ryuko pulled her recording device out of her pocket and thumbed it on, placing it on the table with a customary "do you mind?"

Mechanically, Ryuko asked her questions, shifting in her seat so that her knees faced the door and away from Harime, but the gesture didn't stop the freakishly blond 20-year-old from occasionally reaching out to brush her fingers against the back of Ryuko's hand as she took notes.

After a half an hour or so, the questions on designs and personal habits were all used up, and Ryuko was forced to decide between twenty minutes of a dangerous lack of topic and making questions up off the top of her head. Though remaining exteriorly calm, her mind whirled before snatching up a question that popped to the forefront of her brain.

"What's Kiki's name?"

For the first time in the course of their conversation, Harime Nui sat back and away from Ryuko, grinning a little as she blinked and shifted her eyes slowly to the space to her left.

"Kiki!" she screeched suddenly instead of answering, making the other girl's dyed hair stand on end. "Come here!" Nui leaned against the back of her seat, folding her hands and closing her eyes serenely before addressing Ryuko once more. "She can tell you herself."

Ryuko's heart jumped in anticipation, throbbing painfully in her chest with contained excitement. A tall figure appeared obediently in the doorway with a swish of glossy black hair, and Ryuko couldn't help

but rationalize with a twinge of unacknowledged jealousy that the model must be hopped up on horse vitamins to make her skin glow and her hair shine. As usual, however, Kiki's eyes were dead in her expressionless face, and for a long moment she stood silently in the doorway.

The tabloids hypothesized absently that Kiki was retarded. She never spoke or looked at anyone or anything at all, really. She was never seen without her sister or mother by her side - they gracefully took all questions directed towards her - and her eyes consistently held a checked-out, vacant look. She only ever modeled for Nui, and a few buzzed that some unfortunate mental circumstance kept her from realizing her potential, and that her sister was cruelly cashing in on it.

Ryuko and the rest of the world would've believed it if it weren't for those few candid photos that sold like new Apple products. Every once in a while, a hidden cameraman or sneaky paparazzi would snap a glimpse of Kiki as she was. Every so often, her eyes would be caught glowing with a vibrant fervor of passion and intelligence powerful and seductive enough to make a Tibetan monk jizz his pants. Those shots, few and far between, made the National Geographic cover girl look like day-old asparagus, and they added enough mystery to the supermodel to pique the interest of photographers everywhere.

Ryuko, in the meantime, struggled with her own mystery as the taller girl sat down in the chair Nui had pulled up for her and considered the journalist disinterestedly. Something looked familiar. Ryuko resisted the urge to pound her fist against her head. What was it?

Still grinning, Harime leaned her head against her sister's shoulder. The small blond looked relaxed and doting, but the lust still had not gone from her eyes. Ryuko furrowed her brow as she watched the two sit together. By the sudden tightening of the dark-haired girl's shirt over her stomach and chest, she concluded that Nui had just slid her hand up into the back of her sister's shirt. Goosebumps appeared on Ryuko's arms. Kiki remained expressionless.

"Kiki," Nui whispered, bumping her head lightly against the model's jaw, "Be good and introduce yourself."

"Kiryuin Satsuki," she announced robotically, "The pleasure is mine."

Memories flooded into Ryuko's mind like a searchlight. The metro. Nine years ago. The girl she had pestered her father about for years on end. Her first real unsolved mystery. Almost falling from her chair, Ryuko struggled to remain composed, not sure if she should make it known that they had met before. All discomfort of the last few minutes dissipated as her mind whirled with unanswered questions. She didn't want to say anything in front of Harime, but her chances of meeting Satsuki again were slim, and Ryuko was far from letting go of her childhood fascination. She tapped her fingers spastically against the table, but Nui solved her problem for her.

"Say," she chirped suddenly, sitting up and pulling her hand to herself so she could fold it with its twin on the table. "Our hour's almost up, but I've had such fun talking with you, Ryuko!" She sighed, delicately lifting a finger to her mouth in thought. "Well, on Sundays my family has brunch together! I'm sure your magazine would just love to sport an interview with Kiryuin Ragyo, hmm? Join us! Come on, please?" Her childish twittering did nothing to hide the desire and what looked like malice in her eyes, but Ryuko's hound instinct couldn't let her curiosity go.

She opened her mouth to agree when she caught Satsuki's eye. The powerful blue disks were trembling with sudden meaning and an unidentifiable, desperate vehemence. If Ryuko had had a camera she could have easily made a small fortune. Satsuki gestured almost imperceptively to Ryuko's recorder and whispered something more softly than could be heard. Irritated, Nui forcefully pinched her sister's side.

"Don't mutter, sis. It's not cute." She turned again to Ryuko. "So, how 'bout it, Sweetie?"

Collecting her things, Ryuko nodded quickly and smiled brightly, though her joy came from the thought of finally answering her gnawing questions rather than the idea of brunch with the Kiryuins. Quickly she thanked those involved for their time and saw herself out.

Once she was outside, she examined her recording device and wondered why it had been gestured towards. Suddenly, she remembered Satsuki's unheard murmurs and quickly pressed the fast-forward button until it reached the end of the recording and turned the volume all the way up.

"Get out, please," she had whispered, her voice cracking slightly in the low register, "while you still can."

Ryuko let the hand holding the small record-keeper fall limply to her side as she breathed in awe. Far from being dissuaded from her task, Ryuko grinned wildly as the crisp wind picked up her hair and whipped it about her face.

Despite the instinctive trepidation rising in her gut, she couldn't wait until Sunday.

Chapter 3

Sunday, Kiryuin Manor, main entrance, 10:00am

A butler who Ryuko instantly dubbed "Fat Hitler" showed her into the main dining hall. If it were possible for something to be beautiful sordidly, it would be the house that she had just entered. All the walls were white, giving it that classy asylum feel, but they were covered in large, unidentifiable artwork painted all in only the warmest of tones. The blinding brightness of the walls together with the deepness of the paintings made being in those rooms feel like one was at an exhibit of the infinite. Ryuko felt that if she reached out her hand her arm would go through a painting and into the twisted world depicted inside.

The doors were disproportionately large, and she was glad Fat Hitler was there to help her open them. Nervously, she fiddled with her recorder as Harime's pale purple eyes turned to her without her ever turning her head. The small blonde stood so fast that it resembled a poorly-made stop-motion in which the only pictures taken were of sitting and then fully standing. Just as quickly, she was in Ryuko's face, grinning.

"I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Yeah, my editor was all over this piece, so... ah..." Ryuko rubbed the back of her neck, blushing. She was ushered to her seat next to Satsuki, who was neatly dressed and perfectly still, obviously not engaged in the scene before her. Nui sat on her sister's other side, but unabashedly reached and leaned over her to get to Ryuko. The food was already laid out, but no one was touching it, so Ryuko took the hint and resisted her desire to begin wolfing the exotic-looking spread. Instead, she absently rolled a guava over her bread plate and considered Satsuki.

All she wanted was to talk to her, no, to get her to talk, but the expression in the model's cold eyes instantly killed the possibility. A tiny bit of hatred sparked in Ryuko's chest.

Who does she think she is? Sitting there all beautiful and perfect. She won't even look at me! She's too good for me and everyone else on this goddamn planet!

At this point, however, Ryuko's fascination with Satsuki went beyond good will - it was a matter of pride. Ryuko resolved to unravel her and take her secrets by force, if necessary. Her childhood was spent pestering her exhausted yet unforthcoming father for the details of his odd behavior, riding the metro around and around for hours, hoping she would come back, looking up her name in the phone book and calling every number listed. No, she wasn't damn well about to give up now.

Ryuko opened her mouth to ask an unformulated question when the room was suddenly filled with brilliant light and Nui and Satsuki rose from their places. Following suit, Ryuko jumped to her feet, just barely stopping herself from impulsively saluting.

With sedate yet clacking steps, a statuesque woman dressed all in white entered the room, grinning behind pale, heavily-applied lipstick. Her face was the picture of Aryan perfection, but it was overshadowed by her impossible hair. Defying gravity with ease and perfect aloofness, it rose effortlessly from either side of her head, shimmering in colors as equally impossible as its shape. Fat Hitler pulled her chair back for her, bowing.

Kiryuin Ragyo, Ryuko thought, interested. She watched as she sat at the head of the table, several places up from where the three girls were lined up. Nui was closest to the Kiryuin matriarch, but still further than arm's distance. They all sat down at the same time, though admittedly Ryuko was a little late. Kiryuin Ragyo picked up her silverware and considered Ryuko with an amused tilt to her mouth.

"I see one of you has brought a friend." she lilted in a deep, resonant voice. "Satsuki?"

"No, Mama," Nui buzzed, reaching over her sister's lap to grab Ryuko by the lapel. "I brought her! She's working for the Jakuzure brat and she wants to ask you some questions."

"Interesting..." and she did look interested, her deeply-colored eyes burning against her ivory skin. Ryuko felt pinpricks on the back of her neck as all her hairs began to stand on end. She breathed a sigh of relief as Ragyo averted her gaze and attended to her food, addressing Nui.

"You know better, Nui. No, I won't take any questions today." Harime pretended to look surprised, but Ryuko couldn't help but feel manipulated. "Today is Sunday," Ragyo continued, a far-off look in her eyes. "Today is the day the world-spirit rests in its ceaseless search for self to make itself pure. It is our duty as well to make ourselves pure and those around us who would insult the apex of history!"

Ryuko blinked, unsure how to deal with the odd mix of a random biblical reference and distinctly Hegelian philosophy.

"Today is the day all are purified!" Ragyo looked so excited about her private little world that Ryuko didn't have the heart (or the guts) to point out that she wasn't making any sense. To her amusement, she thought she saw Satsuki rolling her eyes, though she couldn't be sure, for the gesture happened with great speed, if at all. Satsuki leaned forward to mix some milk into her oatmeal, her hair falling in a curtain over her face, but Nui quickly pushed her back and away from the table so she could continue staring fervently at Ryuko, who was now feeling very out of place.

She knew, Ryuko thought, narrowing her eyes, she knew all along I wouldn't be allowed to ask any questions. What a bitch. What the hell does she want from me?

Nui reached over and put her hand on Ryuko's arm.

"That's too bad, but as long as you're here, we might as well make good use of our time together..." Nui's hand drifted up her arm and over onto her neck before slowly gliding down...

Satsuki suddenly jerked forward and grabbed her teacup, gulped from it ferociously and slammed it back down on the table with such force that it shattered, forcing Harime to draw back her arm to keep from being cut on the large shards. Nui glared at Satsuki, who murmured an innocent apology and began to pick up the debris. Ryuko sensed a silent power struggle, and she could have sworn she heard Nui whisper,

"You'd better keep that glass, 'cause I'm gonna make you eat it!"

"It's china, not glass," Satsuki retorted audibly and almost amicably, though there were dark overtones in her voice. Nui's eyes took on a crazy expression and she lifted a hand as if to lunge out in a vicious backhand, but at the last second her eyes shifted again to Ryuko and she smirked.

"Say, Ryuko," she chirped, reaching over to her again, sprawling her arm over her sister's plate, "Why don't you stay today? Mother's right about Sundays. I think everyone should know how our little weekly ritual is done. It really does wonders, doesn't it, Kiki?"

"I... I... well..." Ryuko stuttered, now thoroughly disturbed. She had heard of sibling rivalry, but this battle was operating on a plane that may as well have been in the fourth dimension. She wanted to get up, yell at the top of her lungs, and run out, waving her hands over her head.

Satsuki had bent the fork in her hand and her cheek twitched. Quickly, she glanced over at her mother, who had stopped eating to watch with a mildly amused smirk sprawled lazily over her face. Shaking her head in a 'to hell with it' gesture, she brought the fork down onto Nui's arm.

Nui screeched and gripped herself by the wrist, staring at the blood that gushed out of her arm.

"Nui!" Satsuki cried, "What was your arm doing on my plate? I'll go get you a towel." Without another glance at the inhabitants of the room, she stood smoothly and, casually flipping her hair over her shoulder to keep it from her sister (who was trying to catch hold of her), she grabbed a thoroughly confused Ryuko by the upper arm and dragged her out of the room.

She all but threw her out.

"And don't come back." Satsuki murmured, turning to go back inside the house.

"Wait!" Ryuko called, breathless and completely baffled. But Satsuki didn't wait. She turned her back and shut the door with a loud boom. Angry, Ryuko stood there for a few moments before slinking off, her mind bustling with the force of all she had just witnessed. Even as she moved further and further from the manor, all she could think about was how to get back in. Her intense desire was far from sated. She used to be hungry for the answers behind her little mystery.

Now she was ravenous.

Monday, Kiryuin Manor, master bedroom, 4:30am

Satsuki lay awake, staring at the ceiling as her mind buzzed. She wanted to take a shower, run until she collapsed, then shower again, but she knew better than to get up without permission. Her thoughts drifted to Matoi, and an angry fire lit in her stomach to match the burning between her legs.

She had remembered her at first sight, the girl with the red streaks in her hair who had invited her to lunch. She had thought of her with a reminiscent fondness ever since that day. Closing her eyes, Satsuki smiled a little, thinking back to the girl who had not prodded at her to

divulge her troubles, but had merely and kindheartedly offered her food and rest. That memory (among few others) had held her together over the years, and she regretted her inability to express her gratitude.

The fire of fury grew larger and began to lick her lungs as she reflected on Nui's intentions. Satsuki firmly resolved to never let that sweet childhood memory be taken and twisted into a macabre depiction of horror. She resisted the urge to pound her fist into said sister sleeping to her left and instead let her mind drift to other thoughts.

It was clear that Ryuko had thought her high-handed and disgustingly aloof. And she had been. Never before had Satsuki wanted to much to divulge her plans, her secrets, her true intentions. The loss of what could have been a friend sent her into an unexpected whirlwind of emotion.

She must think I'm an idiot, a sham, she thought with a pained twinge, before she grabbed hold of her feelings and shook them violently. *No. "Don't regard what anyone says of you, for this, after all, is no concern of yours."*

Despite her inner admonitions, Satsuki still found herself still out of her own control, and the passion rose in her throat so that she almost choked herself on the metal prongs that dug into either side of her windpipe. Slowly, so as not to disturb the two monsters resting sedately on either side of her, she wormed a finger between the nylon of the collar locked around her neck and her skin, tugging futilely.

Disgusted, she let her hand fall. It was insulting being forced to wear a training tool for unmanageable dogs. She much preferred the beatings of the past, but models must remain unbruised, flawless. She grit her teeth and almost laughed. Her mother's excuse for using such methods had long ago crossed the line between ensuring her daughter's continued compliance and her own absurd sexual

sadism. It was so sick that thinking about it made Satsuki want to vomit.

Fortunately, her loathing had pushed out the unexpected sadness and Satsuki was able to relax again. So long as she didn't think about Ryuko, she should be able to sleep for an hour or two. She closed her eyes and slid her legs under as much sheet as she reach and forced her muscles to loosen against the mattress. Though she always hated it when the activities of Sunday night ended up in her bedroom, she wished that she was in her bed so that she could reach between the headboard and the mattress and pull out the small, well-used book she kept there.

Soroi had given it to her for her fifteenth birthday, and she must have read it hundreds of times since then. She could almost feel the letters embossed on the leather cover: *The Enchiridion* . She could almost smell the old, dog-eared pages and hear the words of Epictetus in her mind. Many times, on days full of stress and pain, she would recite those long-since memorized words to herself.

"Some things are in our control and others not . "

She felt Nui shift beside her and she turned her back, rolling onto her side. She was cold and her clothes were... somewhere. Satsuki furrowed her brow, honestly unable to remember where she had been stripped. She bit back a groan as she felt an icy hand lazily stroke her between the shoulder blades.

"Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions."

"Kiki," Nui whispered, gently biting her shoulder, "are you still awake?" Ragyo, from the other side, stirred and chuckled, reaching out languidly to take Satsuki by the hip.

"The things in our control are by nature free, but those not in our control are weak, belonging to others. Remember, then, that if you

suppose that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered. You will lament. "

"I'll see to that that," their mother purred, pushing her oldest child over onto her back before suddenly letting go. Satsuki felt rather than heard the sharp click of the button against its plastic casing.

"You will be disturbed, and you will find fault both with gods and men."

Her back arched off the bed as the electricity drubbed her body and pulled her nerves taut. Pain flashed in her mind in spurts of static and white noise. When it ended, she collapsed, trembling and unable to breathe as Nui giggled and reached out to touch her again.

"But if you suppose that only to be your own which is your own, then no one will ever compel you or restrain you. You will do nothing against your will."

Her mother took her by the face and, ignoring the sparks that jumped from black hair to pale digits, stole a leisurely kiss, fingers moving to her jaw to pry her mouth open. Her sister's hand was spread over her belly.

"No one will hurt you, you will have no enemies, and you will not be harmed."

Satsuki held firmly to those words as Ragyo climbed over her and Nui twined their legs together. Her body was not her own, and thinking of it as such could only make her miserable. Her mind, however, would always be free, and soon, if all went according to plan, her body would join her mind in its liberty.

You will be free.

Fork you, Nui!

Chapter 4

When it rained, they played chess. They would sit in the third-storey library with cups of tea as droplets of water lashed against the many-paned window. Her mother would lean back, her eyes half-closed as she lazily considered the game while Satsuki would furiously bite her knuckle, her free hand hovering over the white and green marble board.

Sometimes they would talk of philosophy, and her mind would race and pound, feeling like it was swelling in her skull, as she considered all at once her next move, the construction of her argument, and the consequences should she lose the game.

When she was younger, she would try to protect every piece as if her life depended on it. Every pawn, every rook, every knight was a friend to her, and she almost couldn't bear it when they were swept aside to rest on the table beside the board. Satsuki smiled a little at the memory. Her heart had been so soft then.

She had learned, though, and quickly. There were consequences to losing a game with Kiryuin Ragyo. Often after a game she would look over at the board from where she was pinned down against the window seat and consider her king, firmly in checkmate. As a distraction from the hands that hungrily stroked her every line, she would repeat the game in the reverse in her mind, clutching desperately to the idea that there was some move she could have made that would have saved her. The rules to their little game were ironclad - if she wanted to leave the library untouched, she had to win.

So she had learned the art of sacrifice, of allowing a piece to be surrendered for the sake of the game. Her technique improved, and she remembered with great clarity a day when, in the third hour of the game, her mother had casually asked,

"Do you think Machiavelli is right in saying that the end justifies the mean?"

"Yes," was all that she had said, though her heart held onto the hope that it wasn't unqualifiedly true, for even as the monosyllabic answer drifted from her mouth, her mind was intent on taking back a rook she had given up.

She had thrown it under the bus, but still had every intention of getting it back. Her pawn was two spaces from the back of the board, ready to be traded for what she had given over. That day she had learned that although sacrifice was necessary, she still got to choose what she wanted to sacrifice.

She thought about that day as she stepped out of the building, relieved that the most demeaning lingerie shoot she had ever done was over. Keeping her face locked into neutral in front of the frantic paparazzi, she scanned the crowd for the short blue hair and high collar of her correspondent. She allowed herself to be briefly surprised when she saw Matoi's defiant scowl among the press. She shook her head.

I don't have time for this. Where are you, Inumuta?

She only had a few seconds to slip away, but their meeting was of the utmost importance. Panic started to rise in her chest before she saw him - he was walking towards their meeting place. Relieved, she went to push through the confused crowd when her arm was caught.

"You still owe me, Satsuki." Nui hissed into her ear, all sugary sweetness gone. "You still need to do something to make my arm feel better." Satsuki winced internally. Today's shoot had protected her from Nui's wrath, for there was nowhere for a bruise to hide under the skimpy underwear she had been modeling mere minutes ago.

Her next shoot, however, was for winter wear.

Panic exploded in her throat and Satsuki almost whined, not because of whatever ridiculous atrocity her sister had planned, but because her man was getting further and further away and she had no way to get to him. She turned her head to see her mother come towards them - once she arrived her fate would be set in stone.

Someone had to be thrown under the bus. In less than a few seconds her plan was solidified, the picture unraveled and rewoven in one fluid motion of thought. Regret twinged in her mind, but she reminded herself that the piece she had chosen to sacrifice would be reclaimed in a few moves. She raised an arm to point.

"Isn't that Matoi Ryuko?"

Nui's head swiveled as her pupils instantly dilated. Satsuki smoothly disentangled her arm and disappeared into the crowd, her belly churning.

As she walked, scribbling a hasty note on a printed card, she couldn't help but think that, although she had reclaimed many pieces in the countless matches she had played, she had never once won a game.

Ryuko stared at them, her hands in her pockets, not sure exactly what she was doing. She had caught wind of Kiki's (Satsuki's, she corrected herself) shoot and, despite the fact that Jakuzare had already assigned a different reporter, had scooted quickly downtown, intent on her own private mystery.

She had forgotten everything - her notebook, recorder, even her press badge - so she resigned herself to stand by, a little ashamed of herself, and watch.

I'll get you, Kiryuin Satsuki, her thoughts rumbled in determination as she watched Nui take the model by the arm and whisper in her ear. Satsuki tilted her head away as her eyes awoke and burned for the briefest of moments. The photographers gasped and checked their

digital screens to see if they had caught it. They groaned dejectedly in unison.

Matoi's brow furrowed as she watched Satsuki raise an arm and point to her. She brushed her wild hair from her face and felt her cheeks grow cold as Nui's gaze turned to her. A close-lipped smile spread wildly over the blonde's face. Then Nui was gone, out of her line of sight, as Kiki pushed through the crowd and disappeared into a gaggle of semi-interested plebeians.

Ryuko went to follow the silky black head that was sweeping away, grinning as she added to her list of the disadvantages of being tall she used to console herself about her mediocre height.

Number twenty-six: Nowhere to Hide . Her brain told her excitedly that that would be a great title for a action/thriller screenplay, but the amused thought was quickly dissipated as she felt the nape of her neck grabbed by tiny, powerful fingers.

Nui was in her face, tugging at her clothes, dragging her through the crowd with an amazing swiftness and subtlety, somehow managing to convey a sense of complete ordinariness to the surrounding throng even as Ryuko struggled.

"Hey, sweet thing," Harime purred, never letting go of Ryuko's neck and belt loop. "You had to leave so early the other day. I had some things to show you."

"What do you want!?" Ryuko all but screeched, so surprised by the turn of events that she could barely register the world around her. She knew Nui was creepy (and possibly incestuous), but as she was dragged into an alleyway far from any trace of humanity, the pure evil that was Harime Nui hit her full force.

Nui threw her against the back wall, leaving Ryuko dazed. By the time, however, that Nui's mouth was on her neck and her hands in her shirt, Ryuko's instincts kicked in. She crouched, centering herself, as she delivered a brutal uppercut to the small blonde's jaw.

Ryuko grinned in satisfaction at the crack of bone on bone, but it quickly faded as she realized that Nui barely seemed to feel it.

"You're so cool, Ryuko." Nui murmured, eyes half-lidded as she wiped her mouth, "You look so bad-ass right now." Ryuko kept throwing punches, blows that had dispatched full-sized men in the past, but Harime either dodged them with incredible speed or took them with a giggle.

Ryuko started to panic in a unique mix of fury and disbelief as her fists threw out faster, but more sloppily. Nui grew bored with her game and slipped under Ryuko's guard, grabbing her by the jacket and smashing her repeatedly into the wall behind them.

The world flickered and threw out sparks as Ryuko's head smashed into the brick. Gasping, she slumped into a loose but still guarded heap as Nui let her go. Dazed she looked up as Nui leaned over her, chuckling as her hands reached out.

Oh my God, Ryuko thought, I'm going to be raped. By a skeezy blond chick. I'm not even in prison! She curled in on herself and bared her teeth, reacting more than feeling like a cornered wild animal.

"Harime Nui," a deep voice boomed, "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" Nui turned, her eye twitching, before her face softened into a relaxed smile.

"Kiki. There you are."

Satsuki stood in the entrance of the alley, soft light from the lamppost glowing from behind her, her face set in an expression reminiscent of an Easter Island Head. She had her purse open and was haphazardly yanking out its contents onto the street, pausing only to slide her cash and credit card into a pocket hidden inside her coat.

"Don't you think this could give you some undesirable publicity?" Satsuki rumbled as she walked towards Nui, throwing the purse onto

the ground. Nui hummed, twirling her finger through a curl, not apologetic in the least.

"Sometime, when you see something you want, you just have to have it! Isn't that right, Koko?"

Of all things, Ryuko was disgusted by the nickname. So much so that she clenched her fists again, intent on beating the rapey freak into a pulp. Satsuki beat her to the punch. Literally. Her fist lashed out towards her sister's face. Nui easily avoided the blow, but failed to notice Satsuki's other hand grabbing a fistful of her blond pigtails. Using the momentum of the strike, Satsuki stabilized as best she could in heels and threw Harime to the wet ground.

"You fall for that every time, Harime." Satsuki grunted out, her core tight. Nui lashed out and grabbed the wrist that was still tangled in her hair, pulling Satsuki to the ground with her.

"Who cares?" she screeched, her eyes rolling, "I still win!" In less than a second, Nui's impossible strength had her sister pinned. The blonde cackled crazily as she beat her fists into Satsuki's face and ribs. "I've been waiting too long for this, you subservient little bitch!"

Ryuko jumped without hesitation into the fray, locking one arm around a slender neck and using her other to try to stop the blows that kept falling on Satsuki.

Satsuki coughed, her wind gone, but between blows she managed to make significant eye contact with Ryuko.

"Scream," she mouthed.

Ryuko blinked but did as directed, throwing back her head and letting out a howl that cracked into a high harmonic at the end. It reverberated against the walls of the alley before being released into the world outside. In a few moments, shouts were heard and frantic voices called out to the girls. Ryuko called back and feet pounded just yards away. Nui growled and delivered a final blow before

standing up and promptly punching herself in the face, the force of it sending her back into a wall. The brick crumbled. She added her voice to Ryuko's.

"Help," she screeched, "We've been attacked!"

Rage boiled up in Ryuko as she recognized the ploy. Too many people crushed into the alleyway, concerned and helpful but utterly suffocating. She turned to Satsuki, who was struggling to sit up, but no signs of rebellion showed on her face. With a gasp, Ryuko realized why Satsuki had disemboweled her purse before launching her failed attack. She had foreseen the deception and was playing into it.

Ryuko shook her head in utter disbelief and snapped her mouth shut. If Nui and Satsuki both attested to imaginary muggers, any story she divulged otherwise would look like the stressed ravings of a traumatized girl.

The cops had arrived, shoving bystanders aside and barking out orders before taking the three girls and gently leading them to the waiting ambulance to be looked over. Satsuki, blood running into her eye, brushed up against Ryuko and slid something into her pocket. A faint rainbow-colored glow appeared in the corner of her eye, and she turned to see Kiryuin Ragyo stride through the crowd that seemed to melt before her powerful charisma. Her hand was over her mouth and her eyebrows were knit together, but her dark red eyes still gleamed with perpetual mirth.

Brooking no argument, Ragyo took both of her daughters into her arms, waving aside the police officers and frantic paramedics. Satsuki held a hand over her face and winced as her mother kissed the top of her head, but overall she looked relieved, as if she had regained something she had lost.

Ryuko looked away and shoved back the poor man who was trying to attend to her bleeding head, her reaction to the events of the last

few minutes manifesting itself as anger. Furiously, she dug into her pocket, pulling out the card Satsuki had placed there.

Number Four, it read, before it listed an address. She flipped the card over and squinted as she struggled to read the tiny scrawl on the back. *Stay at this address for a few days, it read, then go stay with a family member for a week or two. I will contact you. For the love of God, don't go to work!*

Ryuko grit her teeth, committing the address to memory before tearing it to shreds and dropping the pieces into a puddle. She shook her head at the officers who tried to take a statement from her, feigning shock. From across the street, she could just make out Nui rambling in a very convincing shaken-and-terrified voice about four huge burly muggers. Ryuko could barely keep from screaming in rage, her body trembling. An officer tried to restrain her as she stomped down the street.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, face unsure.

"I'm fucking going home!" She bellowed, shaking off the hand and stalked away, her own hand pressed to the back of her head.

Fear not, we will hear more about Satsuki soon!

~Bad Mitt

Chapter 5

The next day, 6:30am

Nui stormed breathlessly into the spacious drawing room on the second floor of the Kiryuin manor. She threw herself with great force into a large armchair, causing the long-suffering piece of furniture to plaintively groan.

"She's nowhere!" Nui screeched, her high tone causing the windows to shudder in hidden resonance. Harime panted like a wild animal. Her hair was soaked and slicked against her head, making her eyes look huge and alien as they glowed feverishly in the soft lamplight.

Ragyo looked up from her book, raising a stately white eyebrow over her reading glasses. Her face twisted into a mix of annoyance and amusement, and, slowly, she closed her book, uncrossed her legs, and leaned towards her youngest. The lamp now behind her, her face was cast into shadow, lit only by the self-subsistent radiance of her hair.

Sensing her window of opportunity for undivided attention, Nui launched into her canticle of woe.

"I almost had her, I really did! She just disappeared! She wasn't at her house, or work, or her favorite restaurant. She just... just... she's gone... It's raining. I've been out all night, and I just wanna..." Nui's eyes began to burn. Shifting, antsy, in her seat, she swung her legs spastically. "Where's Satsuki? She owes me." She licked her lips.

"Sleeping."

Harime stood quickly, flexing her fingers and swinging her arms as if to leave. Before she could move, though, her mother was standing and not six inches from her.

They say that power is something you're born with, that you can't learn charisma. They're wrong. Power is all body language, a direct command to the animal in human nature. Ragyo stood, shoulders back, eyes staring directly into her Nui's, her mouth twisted into a relaxed but threatening grin. Her stance said 'I am alpha. Submit or die.' It was the implicit command recognized by the wild animal, recognized by the part in us that fights, hungers, and fears.

"You will not disturb her." Ragyo's voice rumbled around in her chest as her eyes burned with undeniable will. She offered no explanation - none was needed.

Nui responded immediately, sitting back down and pulling her knees up slightly, her face breaking into a wide, submissive grin.

"Of course, Mother," she whimpered through her teeth, looking away. Ragyo too relaxed, a smug smile on her face as she resumed her seat. Nui looked downcast, silently shifting her eyes from her mother's face to the door, not daring to look at either one for too long.

Ragyo threw her a bone, the equivalent of patting the head of the beaten dog:

"What was the name of that girl who caught your eye?"

"Matoi," the young girl perked up - you could almost see her wagging her tail. "Matoi Ryuko."

Ragyo cocked an eyebrow, genuinely engaged.

"How interesting," she murmured. "Nui, I think I know of a way for you to find your friend. I have a job for you, and I'll bet little Ryuko will be interested in the outcome." Nui grinned and sat up straight, cocking her head to one side.

"What's that, Mama?"

"There's a scientist by the name of Matoi Isshen. I need him... disposed of." Ragyo relayed her instructions carefully, Nui nodding crazily all the while. When she was finished, Nui jumped up and bowed theatrically.

"I'll do it! This will be fun! I'll bet Ryuko will be so surprised!"

"Good girl. You take care of that, and I'll take care of your sister."

After Nui had left, Kiryuin Ragyo sat back in her chair and leaned her chin against her hand. It was getting more and more inconvenient to keep Nui away from Satsuki. Her lip curled in distaste.

Nui was an animal. She solved all her problems and satisfied her lust for blood with base brutality. She knew nothing of the hidden defiance of the mind. All she could do was beat and torture and laugh at her carnage, never knowing that her target remained noncompliant and unbroken. Nui was an animal, and had to be dealt with as such. Ragyo knew better than to believe that such viciousness could break Kiryuin Satsuki.

No, the Kiryuin matriarch thought, sliding her fingers up to rest pensively on her mouth. *Satsuki requires a gentler touch.*

She looked out the window at the dawn, pensive. No, Satsuki was human to the extreme, full of pride, feeling, and rational reliance. Bringing her to submission would not be so easy. Kiryuin Ragyo was no fool. Even though her eldest wordlessly obeyed her every command, it was clear she still considered herself free. Ragyo chuckled to herself, resting her face on her hand.

Silly girl.

She had thought that continually claiming her body would be enough to eventually break her. She was pleasantly surprised when it did not. Nui was no fun. It took almost nothing to gain her complete compliance.

Not Satsuki. She had only cried once, when her innocence was first taken, and Ragyo was fairly certain it was only from pain and raw astonishment. She was incessantly defiant, and although their little struggles were delightfully exciting, Ragyo could not allow such insubordination any longer. Her daughter's strength of will was becoming troublesome, dangerous even. Often she would slip away, expertly throwing tails. Traces of corrupted correspondences were left on her computer, any recognizable remnants eaten away by some unknown virus. Her room constantly smelled of the sweet, acrid scent of burned paper. Ragyo didn't know what she was up to, and she didn't much care - it was the spirit of the thing that annoyed her.

Satsuki belonged to her, and it irked her that she didn't know it yet.

I need to break her.

The endgame was upon them, all the necessary pieces set into play. REVOCS owned over ninety percent of the market, and soon it would be time. Ragyo couldn't afford any stray or errant slaves, as entertaining as they might be.

Kiryuin Ragyo shifted in her seat, brushing a stray piece of hair behind her ear as she reached for the phone on the end table. As she listened to the ringing on the other line, she considered her first move.

She was aware of her daughter's absurd attachment to stoicism (she was beginning to regret allowing it). Satsuki held so tightly to the idea that nothing could make her act dishonorably without her consent, and in this her freedom consisted. Still waiting for the other line to pick up, she pulled back the corners of her mouth in a crooked grin. The sadistic pleasure of her sickness spread through her belly, and she relished it fully, moving to slide a hand into her own dress.

It would just break her little heart if she found out she can't even control herself.

The other line picked up.

"Yes, hello?"

Her plan solidified as she stood and swept towards the window. Excitement spread through her, sending a wave of pleasure through her body, making her tremble. When she was finished, her daughter would no longer be the girl who stands tall and regal through countless travails, the girl who never makes a sound, never cries. No, she would be the girl who begs on her hands and knees for mercy, for escape from the pain, the girl who wantonly screams out her pleasure in the most shameful trysts imaginable.

"Yes, this is Kiryuin Ragyo."

And she would cry. After accepting her punishment, she would crawl, sobbing, to be held and comforted by the very woman who had disciplined her. Ragyo held in a chuckle, very aware of the receiver by her mouth.

Delightful .

"I'm afraid Satsuki won't be able to make it to her scheduled shoots for the next few weeks."

"We're very sorry to hear this," the man on the other line replied smoothly, no doubt planning to call his lawyers about breach of contract the second he hung up the phone. "Can I ask why?"

Ragyo threw her head back, her face stretched into a laugh, though no sound escaped her lips. Her hands were wandering over her own body as her exhilaration grew almost too great to bear.

"Oh, we just need some family time. I'm sure you understand."

Satsuki opened the door to the small office and took a glance at the line of desks in the bullpen. She felt almost amused by the shocked

faces of the squalid little reporters. Smoothly, she stepped inside and walked to the back of the building, flicking her hair over her shoulder. Immediately, she regretted it as the weight of her hair tugged at her bruised head. She pressed a hand to her skull.

Nui's so annoying.

She opened the door to the back office, the windows covered by closed Venetian blinds. She stopped, surprised, then stifled a laugh; Jakuzure Nonon snored face-down on her desk, legs tucked under her in her chair. Satsuki, a smile twisting at her mouth, leaned against the desk and tapped the wood by Nonon's head. She awoke with a start.

"F sharp!" she cried, her hands reaching up to clutch the oversized hat pulled over her disheveled pink hair. "I said F sharp, you idiots!"

"Are you still living in your music, old friend?" Satsuki asked softly. Nonon jumped up, squeaking.

"Satsuki!" she practically jumped over the desk to take her friend into her arms. Satsuki fidgeted nervously in the hug, awkwardly patting Nonon's back. "I haven't seen you in so long! Well, really seen. The dumb bitches out there can't get enough of you. Do you know how much money you make me? Oh my God, your face! I heard about that!"

Satsuki grabbed the hand that reached up to touch the purple and yellow marks on her face, not allowing such intimate contact. Nonon took note and stepped back to lean against her desk, elbows propped akimbo against the edge of the counter.

"Those 'muggers' must have been pretty tough, huh?" Nonon said, making quotation marks in the air with her fingers. Satsuki looked away and changed the subject.

"Matoi Ryuko hasn't been here, has she?" Nonon narrowed her eyes but allowed her friend's evasiveness to slip by without overt scrutiny.

"Nah. I saw she was with you when that happened. I've been getting calls nonstop about people who want her side of the story, 'cause the Kiryuins have been so damn withholding on the details. No offense." Nonon shook her head. "I've been calling her and leaving all kinds of angry messages, but she just disappeared. Little whore."

"Good," Satsuki sighed, slumping into the guest chair by the door. "I hope she has the good sense to make herself scarce." Nonon cocked an eyebrow at her, making a humming sound through her nose that sounded more like a hiss than anything. Satsuki looked up, her eyes shifting around the room as if looking for escape before she huffed and folded her arms. "There were no muggers. Nui has her eye on Matoi. It was bad."

"Ah, I hate that freak," Nonon groaned, rocking back onto her hands. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Satsuki admitted, "But Nui's been getting her way for far too long. It's time I put an end to it."

Nonon noted the determined tilt to Satsuki's shoulders and wondered what was going on in her friend's mind.

"We're heading into the endgame, my friend. Things are about to change." Satsuki fixed Nonon with her gaze, her eyes flashing with intense fortitude and what looked like hope. "Do you have Matoi's contact information? I need it."

Sorry this is so short. This was hard to write. I just kept saying "ew, ew, ew." the whole time I was writing. Ragyo's such a freak!

Chapter 6

Two days later, Safe House #4, 12:15 noon.

Ryuko shifted and sighed, scooting closer to the small kitchen table so that she could rest the entire length of her calves on the table instead of just her heels. She knew that today (the third day of her imprisonment) was the day it was supposed to be safe to leave, but she was filled with the sluggishness that comes with prolonged inactivity and didn't want to move.

The whole time she was there, she couldn't wait to leave. The small apartment was clean and well-furnished, but it looked like it belonged to a simultaneously weird and boring old man. The refrigerator was full of food, but it was what Ryuko had dubbed "gross food": eggs, granola, yogurt, carrots, something that looked like kale in the bottom drawer, etc. She had considered curiously the avocados in the fruit basket on the counter before opening all the cabinets. She was disappointed to find only a mix for a protein shake and a small tin full of dried leaves.

She would not be proud to admit that she had tried to smoke them. It was only after she had choked and nearly set off the smoke alarm that she realized it was tea.

It was also boring. There was no television, only a small bookshelf full of books. Weird books. Ryuko distinctly remembered picking up a book that was titled *Critique of Pure Reason*. She had screamed like she had seen a spider and threw it into the corner of the room. Her interest was piqued when she noticed that there were what looked like little doodles in the margins. But it had turned out that they were just tiny illustrations of chess boards with moves listed under them. Knight to king-bishop four, queen to queen-rook two. Boring!

Kiryuin Satsuki, she had thought, *Why do I waste my time on you?*

But her interest and attraction, bordering on psychotic, could not be quelled. She had found herself a few days ago staring like a fool at the magazine sporting Satsuki's image while waiting in line to buy milk and waffles. She blushed as she found herself wishing she had another magazine to stare at. She covered her face with her hands, feeling the heat of her flush.

Why does she have to be so goddamn beautiful?

But beauty was not enough to make Ryuko forget that languid arm rising to point her out in the crowd, directing those insane purple eyes to her. The heat in her face intensified as anger joined embarrassment. She jumped up, sluggishness dispelled, and slammed her palm against the table, making it shudder. She would never admit how much her unpleasant encounter with Harime Nui had shaken her. Even as she thought about it, her breath grew short and gasping as she remembered how helpless she had felt. Forcefully pushing down the lingering fear with rage, she grabbed her things and sped out the door, not bothering to close it behind her. She ran through the streets for a long time, her backpack slapping against her shoulders.

Dad will know that to do, she thought, I hope he's home. Maybe I should call him.

Ultimately, she decided not to.

Harime Nui was a born hunter. Not like a borzoi tearing all-out after a wolf, panting and slobbering. More like a leopard, stalking in the shadows after a cute little baby deer. She would trap it and play with it mercilessly before dragging it into a tree to eat half of it before leaving the dead body to fall on a passing tourist.

She had spent the day previous circling the building, looking for signs of life while discreetly flicking cigarette butts into every flowerbed she could find. It had to look like the doc was a filthy smoker. Nui chuckled to herself as she sat on the roof, swinging her

legs. The estate was remote and far from any prying eyes, giving her more freedom for her exploits than usual. Slowly, she slunk behind the brick chimney as a car pulled into the driveway.

Man, what a geezer, she thought as she discreetly examined the old man in the lab coat shuffle into the house. *I wonder what quarrel Mama has with this loser*. She shrugged to herself, not much caring. When she was finished, someone would notice the explosion and call the police. Then, all she would have to do was sit back and wait for Ryuko to come rushing to her. She licked her lips.

She'll be so sad about her poor daddy's 'accident.' I'll bet I can make her feel better.

A suppressed giggle came out as a wheeze.

The things I will do to that girl.

She shifted and dropped lightly onto the kitchen windowsill below, balancing effortlessly on her farcically high heels. She slipped her measuring tape through the crack between the panes and flicked the latch open. In less than ten seconds, she flitted in, turned the gas on on the stove, and slipped out again, sealing the window behind her. She made a quick round of the house to make sure all the windows were closed before perching on the roof again. Sighing, she curled up on her side to take a nap, cooing happily as she thought of the good times ahead.

Pain, rage, fear. It wasn't healing. Why wasn't it healing? Nui heard herself screaming, cupping her hands over her left eye, gushing blood. The old man was dead (close enough), but the fucking bastard had cut out her fucking eye!

Oh, God, why isn't it healing? Barely able to see through her good eye, partially blind from pain, Nui stared at the purple scissor-knife in her hand before throwing back her head and thrashing it back and forth, her pigtailed wet with blood. Pain was not a sensation she was

familiar with, and, like the blind man who is suddenly given sight, she was overwhelmed and baffled with the new sensation.

She heard the door click open and a voice shouting in the foyer. Who was it? No one was supposed to come! Oh, God, it hurt! Nui panicked. She needed to get out. She wanted to go home and let her mom take care of her. Still, her gut clenched at the thought of abandoning her true mission. A sudden burst of pain washed the thought from her mind and, resolve crumbling, she slipped out the back door. She paused only to light a match and throw it into the line of gasoline she had previously spilled against the wooden door.

It's okay, she reassured herself, I still have time.

Satsuki answered her phone as she walked down the stairs to the foyer, holding the phone to her ear by pressing it between her jaw and shoulder because she was so comfortable with her hands thumbs up in the back pockets of her jeans. It wasn't often that she got to wear street clothes, and she relished the feel of the cotton on her skin.

"Yes, hello?"

"Miss Satsuki," Soroi croaked warmly. Satsuki smiled. Soroi had been like a father to her for years, taking care of her when no one else knew she needed to be taken care of. Her face twisted, though, as she realized why he was calling.

"Hello, Soroi," she answered crisply as she stopped on the landing to lean against the banister. "How is your nephew?"

"He's well," he answered slowly, meaningfully, "He told me to tell you that it might rain today, so to bring an umbrella when you go out."

"I will. Thank you." She hung up without ceremony. So it was finally finished. She didn't know whether to laugh or to cringe. The completion of her lengthy project meant that she finally had

something to fight back with, but the thought of the trials necessarily involved with rebellion put steel into her gut and a frown on her face.

It's not time yet, she chastised herself for her hasty thoughts and turned her mind to other things. She looked down at the phone still in her hand and blinked at it, remembering. *Ah, Matoi. If she's smart she's still alive*. Hastily, she punched in the number she had received from Jakuzure and ran her hand over the silky wood of the railing, still loitering by the stairs. Her mind hummed sleepily behind her eyes, threatening to erupt and spill its stresses into her consciousness.

The phone rang for a long time before it was picked up and a shriek filled her ears. Satsuki's eyes went wide and her body tensed as she clutched the phone in both hands.

"Matoi? Matoi. Calm down, what's wrong?" For a while there was nothing but ragged gasping before a wet, angrily sobbing voice answered.

"Fuck you, Kiryuin," Ryuko gasped on the other line, kneeling in the wet grass as the heat from her burning home blistered her skin. She looked, her vision blurring, at her bloody hand as it clutched a large red knife. Her mind almost collapsed in on itself as she struggled to register that she had just pulled a huge half-scissor from her father's chest. Blood was everywhere, on her clothes, smeared onto her face, and the heat was too much. It suffocated her as her shock and anger rose up from her gut and choked out of her throat in a ragged cry.

"Stay calm, Matoi, I'm coming." Satsuki stepped down from the landing and strode hastily to the door. She knew from Nonon that Ryuko would probably be staying at her father's place on the outskirts of town, but from the sound of things, something had gone horribly wrong.

Nui, she seethed to herself, *How did she move so quickly?* Shaking her head, she bent over the umbrella holder by the door and rifled

through the folds of the white umbrellas tucked in against each other. Her hand grasped the smooth hilt of the small blade and she pulled it swiftly from its hiding place.

Still listening to Ryuko pant and growl curses on the other line, Satsuki admired the perfectly-crafted black knife. *Shiro*, she thought, *you've outdone yourself* . She could finally step outside the door knowing that if she met Nui, she had a chance at protecting herself and those she cared about.

Do I care about Ryuko? she thought, unexpectedly. Yes, she decided firmly, before reaching for the doorknob. She realized with a start that she had left the sheath of the blade in the umbrella holder and she stopped and slid the knife back into the vase to connect with its counterpart, addressing Ryuko as she did so.

"Matoi, you need to get away from there. I'm coming to get you, but if you want to stay alive you have to hide. Matoi, are you listening? Whatever you do, don't -"

She stopped suddenly as she felt an arm snake around her waist, squeezing her forcefully. Another hand spread over her shoulder blades, keeping her bent over the umbrella stand.

"Are you making plans with a friend, Satsuki?" her mother, hummed, sounding pleased with herself. "Let me see." Satsuki moved as if to relinquish the phone before pretending to accidentally drop it, twisting her wrist so that the phone fell with a violent spin and cracked sharply against the marble floor. The screen shattered and went dark.

"I'm sorry." Satsuki murmured. Ragyo chuckled and casually wrapped a lock of her daughter's hair around her finger and used it to tug Satsuki into a standing position. As she was pulled up, Satsuki couldn't help but think about the blade still hidden and still in reach. She considered grabbing it and ramming it into her mother's eye, but, though the thought gave her great satisfaction, she steeled herself and let her arm go limp.

No, she reminded herself. *It's not time yet*. She fretted briefly about Ryuko before reminding herself that there was nothing she could do. *She's strong. She'll make it. She has to.* Ragyo let go of her hair and slid her hand into the neck of her shirt, making Satsuki shiver as the freezing fingers traced lazy patterns over her warm skin.

"That's too bad," Ragyo spoke softly into her hair, "but I need you here today." There was a peculiar, unfamiliar venom in her voice that made Satsuki pause. Her heart beat faster as she was released briefly and spun around before being pressed again into her mother's arms. Instinctively, she grabbed Ragyo's shoulders and pushed away, but Ragyo only chuckled and pulled her closer, her red eyes burning with mirth and lust. A large hand took Satsuki by the back of the neck and roughly kneaded the base of her skull, making her scalp tingle.

"Come with me," Ragyo purred, pausing briefly to lay a kiss over Satsuki's rapid pulse. "I have something to show you."

Satsuki felt her body go cold and numb, and as she was taken inexorably away, her mind's eye kept replaying the moment when she had released the hidden knife and relinquished all her power.

What have I done?

Miles away, Ryuko clutched her phone in her hand, staring at the pulsing "call ended" screen. The house behind her crackled as it burned, filling her ears with a roaring to match the howl of her blood in her ears. Fingers curling, her phone's screen cracked and splintered. Stiffly, she moved her eyes to the large scissor in her hand. Her mind flashed back and reeled anew at the sight of her father's face, twisted and animal beyond recognition with the pain of death.

What do I do?

I originally started writing this to help me write my thesis. I figured if I was already sitting down and in the writing mindset, it would be easier to plug away with my project. Haha, I'm stupid. All I do now is write this damn thing. That said (and realized), I'm torn on whether or not to continue this. I know people are reading this thing, and I know how annoying it is when people stop posting right at cliffhangers (seriously, that's infuriating!) But at the same time... well, anyway, at the very least, it'll be longer between updates. Sorry!

Also, I got a request to post this on Ao3, but I'm having trouble getting an invite, so for now you'll (whoever you are) have to put up with FF's annoying layout.

Chapter 7

There was nothing. She was alone in the unending darkness and immutable silence. She was a thoughtless, bodiless, slowly fading consciousness without a name. Her mind couldn't function, she was everything and nothing. Satsuki felt herself slipping away, and in a desperate attempt to regain her sanity, she viciously jerked her arm. The sudden stop at the wrist, the searing pain in her shoulder, and the barely perceptible vibration of the bed beneath her for a single moment gave her a handhold on her thoughts.

She knew where she was. She knew that the small black space where she now lived wasn't real. She cursed herself for allowing the simple padding binding her eyes and ears to take her mind away. She knew she was lying on her back, limbs cuffed to bedposts. There might have been a sheet over her, but the perpetual lukewarm stillness had robbed her of her ability to sense it. She shifted her hips as much as she was able, and was satisfied by the scrape of cotton over her skin. Soon, though, the stillness returned, and the sheet disappeared from her consciousness.

She was falling back again, going to become a timeless nothing. Satsuki jerked herself again. Why couldn't she think? She had always thought her mind a castle, something apart from her body, but here, where she couldn't see or hear, where there was nothing to smell, feel, or taste, she began to understand her own piteous dependence.

She felt a whimper rise in her throat. Muzzy, she wondered if she had made a sound or not.

If someone screams in a forest, but nobody hears it, does it make a sound? Ehhaha. She hated herself for mentally chuckling at that poor excuse for a joke. Satsuki had never been good at making jokes.

A sudden touch set her nerves into a jumbled frenzy. A finger dragged down her lateral line from clavicle to pelvis, taking the sheet with it. Normally, such comparatively innocent contact wouldn't make her so much as blink, but here, in this black empty place, the touch was like fire, burning down her body in curlicues of rediscovered sensation.

Her mind had never been less her own. It belonged to the box now. And here in the box there was nothing except for the invisible hands, tickling and tearing at her nerves. Her thoughts were jagged, breaking off into shards of panic. She couldn't tell if she was being pleased or tortured, and it confused her. She would have given in, would have let her spirit crumble right there and then, if it hadn't been for one single thought:

You are better than this. Better than her.

The furious spinning of her thoughts froze suddenly, though her body still trembled under the hands now lightly scraping across the dip between her hips. She took a deep breath. Satsuki knew she couldn't exist inside the box, so she went to live somewhere else. Somewhere she had already been.

Her memories were often not pleasant, but at least there was light there. Leaving (as she often did when with her mother) her body to its own devices, Satsuki withdrew into her earliest memories.

"Please, Mother, let me hold her!"

A very small Satsuki bounced on her toes as she gripped the armrest of the sofa, gazing fervently at the baby in her mother's lap. Ragyo turned and appraised Satsuki coolly, one snow-white eyebrow raised.

"Please? I promise I won't drop her!" Without saying a word, the little girl's mother scooped her up with one arm, making her gasp in surprise. Ragyo gripped the baby firmly in one arm and her oldest in

the other, holding Satsuki close to her face to scrutinize her. Satsuki fidgeted under the gaze but held firm. "Please?"

Ragyo suddenly smiled, her face softening, and kissed Satsuki's cheek before depositing her on the couch. Carefully, she laid the sleeping baby into Satsuki's eager arms. Ragyo stood and turned to go.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." her voice hardened suddenly as she continued to speak over her shoulder, "Remember that you promised not to drop her, Satsuki." The little girl nodded firmly and turned her attention to her prize.

For a long while, the baby slept, and Satsuki gazed adoringly at her.

"Hi, little sis. I'm here for you. I'll always take care of you and we can play together sometimes if you ever learn how, okay?" To her great delight, the baby opened her great big eyes and cooed at her. Satsuki gasped and carefully lifted the baby up to kiss her. She went to lay her back down, but her sister had grabbed a large fistful of her soft black hair and was pulling mercilessly.

"Ow. Hey. Sto - OW!" Satsuki stood and pressed the baby to her body to try to trap the tiny arms against her body to stop them from their insistent yanking. Somehow, her sister's other hand had managed to catch hold of more hair. The baby chortled at this new amusement as she pulled harder.

Satsuki bit her lip. She was too small to climb back onto the couch while holding the baby, and she needed both hands to even hold her up. Tears of pain welled in her eyes as she held her sister helplessly. There was a sharp rip and the baby gazed in wonder at the chunk of torn hair she held in her fat fist. Satsuki almost dropped her then, but at the last minute she clutched her tighter.

No, I promised!

Satsuki stood there and cried as her sister gleefully ripped chunks out of her hair. Blood was seeping down into her collar and she breathed in ragged sobs, burying her face into the baby's soft neck as disproportionately powerful hands wreaked havoc on her hair.

I won't drop her. I won't. She's my sister. I promised I would take care of her.

Then her father was there, wrenching the baby from her grasp and scooping her up, comforting her. Satsuki grasped his shirt gratefully, wiping her face against the rough fabric as he held her gently against his chest. The baby was crying, deprived of her new plaything, but her father ignored her, only picking her up to hand her silently to his wife as he passed her in the hall. Satsuki looked over her father's shoulder as he carried her to the door, and she thought she saw the ghost of a smile play over her mother's face as she rocked the baby in her arms.

She never asked to hold Nui again.

Ryuko slammed the door to Nonon's office open so hard it bounced off the wall, springing back to crack her in the face if she hadn't caught it, splintering the wood beneath her grip.

"Jakuzure, I - "

"What the hell, Matoi!?" Nonon screeched, jumping up and shoving Ryuko out so suddenly that she fell back, tearing out a chunk of the doorframe in her attempt to stay upright. "Harime's already been here once and I'll be damned if I ever have to see her creepy face again." Ryuko held her breath, blushing furiously. Resisting the urge to whimper out a pathetic 'what did she tell you?' she stood and dusted off her jacket, sneering.

"You shoulda said something to me before assigning me to that interview, you little snake. It's your own damn fault."

"How was I supposed to know the little pervert would get the hots for your scrawny ass?" The reporters working in the main office had stopped to stare, and at that comment several mouths dropped open. Still the color of strawberries, Ryuko defiantly set her arms akimbo.

"The alley. Now." She turned on one heel, her non-pivoting foot swinging out to kick over a wastebasket in a gesture of utter nonchalance. Nonon groaned and followed her.

"Get back to work, you floozies," she called squeakily to her aghast subordinates, "before I fire the lot of you." She slammed the door behind her.

"Matoi." Jakuzure hissed, breath misting in the fall air. "You are literally on a paid vacation. I am *paying* you to not come back here. What the hell are you *doing* ?"

"My dad's dead." Ryuko intoned flatly, abandoning what little tact she had in her. "Murdered. Blood everywhere. My house exploded." She shoved her hands into her pockets and rocked back onto the heels of her sneakers to lean against the brick wall behind her, looking away. Without saying a word, Nonon went back into the building, but she was back in less than a minute, carrying her coffee thermos.

"Here," she muttered, tossing the thermos to Ryuko. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want any -"

"It's vodka." Ryuko's eyes widened, but she hastily unscrewed the cap and took a swig. Sucking in air between her teeth with her lips pulled back, she looked at the tiny pink thing before her and considered how to formulate her request. She and Jakuzure had been working together for several years, and it had always been rocky between them. They disputed everything constantly, from style to office-appropriate behavior, but Ryuko had no other leads and her involvement with the Kiryuins had very recently become very personal.

"Jakuzure," she started, "I know you have an in with the Kiryuins. You have to give me information." Nonon raised an eyebrow, puffing out her cheeks as she held her breath. Ryuko sighed, bumping her head against the brick behind her. "Look, it's not just my weird little fetish anymore. Someone killed my dad and it was probably Nui, and I have nowhere to go from here. She has to go down and I can't do it myself. I *know* you can help me."

"How exactly can I help you, again?"

"You obviously have connections with those psychos! How else could a shitty paper like this get exclusive interviews with the most powerful clothing people on the planet?" Nonon deflated, letting out her breath in a sigh and slouching slightly.

"I'm just friends with Satsuki, Matoi, okay?" Nonon curled a finger around a lock of her bubblegum-colored hair. "We grew up together. We help each other out. If that's what you call an in, then, sure, I got one, but that doesn't help you."

"Yeah, it does!" Ryuko's eyes burned brightly and she grabbed her editor by the shoulders suddenly, making her squeak in surprise. "Right after I found my dad..." Ryuko closed her eyes to shut out the memories, forcing steel into her spine as she fought back sudden tears. "She called me. She said she was coming to get me, and that I needed to do something, but then I lost the call... She can help me, and you can get me to her!"

"She didn't call you back?"

"No. I called her back about a hundred times, though. I must've left thirty messages."

Nonon suddenly turned and started pacing, breathing raggedly as she raked her hands through her hair, sending her hat flying.

"Matoi, this is bad, this is really bad."

"Eh?" Ryuko grunted, confused, her chain of thought abruptly broken.

"Ryuko," for the first time, Nonon used her given name, "Kiryuin Satsuki lives her day-to-day life in the presence of very dangerous, very unpredictable people. I'm surprised she's still alive, honestly. I don't know what goes on in that house, but whatever it is, it's seriously jacked up. If she called you and then just hung up and didn't call back, it means something went horribly wrong." Nonon started biting her nails, worry and stress threatening to fill her eyes with tears. If there was one person she loved in the world, it was Satsuki.

For now-selfish reasons, she wanted to help Ryuko. She knew that if they were going to make any headway, they would need information. Nonon knew an Intel guy, but at the same time, she wasn't willing to jeopardize her friend's ten-year plan just because she went into search-and-rescue overdrive. A sudden spark lit up Nonon's eyes as she remembered a distant event.

"Hold on, Matoi," she said gently to a now very jumbled Ryuko. "I think I can help." Again, she disappeared and returned, this time with a business card. "Here. I worked with this girl a long time ago. She's a disaster. She's unpredictable and ridiculous and an outright slacker, but she is one of the most talented hackers I've ever met. If you can get her to take your case, she can get you more ins with the Kiryuins than you'll have time for."

Ryuko took the card examining it carefully. It was covered in stickers of cats and glitter and was the most atrocious color imaginable.

"Keep me posted, Matoi," Nonon called over her shoulder as she turned to go back into the building. "And try not to do anything stupid."

Ryuko turned the card over to read the name on its back.

Mankanshoku Mako

Sorry for the short chapter. I have a tendency to go into troll-mode when I try to write about torture. "They bet you up and raped you and the dark lord gave you the posion," am I right? Anybody know what I'm talking about? Oh well. I'll try harder next chapter. Feel free to send any suggestions my way.

Chapter 8

Ever since Ryuko was young, she'd loved roller skating. Her dad used to take her to the skating parties her insane orthodontist used to throw for all his patients, and though it was a poor excuse for an apology on the part of the man who tortured her face for money, she couldn't help looking forward to them every year.

Her dad wouldn't dish out the extra few dollars for in-line skates, but Ryuko didn't care. She loved the classic skates, with their smell of leather and their funny four-wheeled look. She would zoom through herds of younger kids drooling under the weight of the metric ton of metal in their mouths as they shuffled hopelessly over the polished floor. She didn't mind them. She remembered with great clarity the exhilaration of taking a wild leap over a sprawling turtle-neck-wearing goon and drifting around the corner as parents, turned fierce with care, shouted angrily at her.

When she picked up a job in high school, she blew a significant amount of her money on skating passes. The rinks now free of kindergarteners, she threw her energies into learning to trick-skate. There was something about hurtling at high speeds towards a wall a mere fifty yards away, yet still knowing that all she needed to do was casually flick her heels or shift her weight to keep her from her fate that made her feel exquisitely alive.

It looked like walking, but felt like flying. She walked on the edge of death without realizing or acknowledging it.

Ryuko thought herself well-acquainted with this raw feeling of speed and unrealized danger, but the few moments she had felt so faded into insignificance as she came face-to-face with a woman who apparently lived her whole life on wheels.

She was utterly out of control, and yet so calm it made Ryuko's vision blur.

She had knocked on the door, hands clutching a bag of Jolly Ranchers (Nonon had insisted she bring them with her to appease what she called "the beast.") And, after a long interval, it was thrown open with such violence that wood dust was spattered out of the doorframe and onto Ryuko's jacket. A smallish woman stood before her, her hands crossed and thrown over her head in a gesture of haphazard indignation. She was wearing a crisp blue blazer over a white blouse, and she would've looked very professional if it hadn't been for the patterned pajama bottoms and bed-head.

"Mankanshoku Mako" she shouted, her cheeks puffed out in an attempt to set her mouth into a firm line. "Is no one's booty call!"

"I'm sorry, I just..."

"No!" She slammed her fist down into her open palm, coconut-shaped hair flying in a brown halo around her head. "People coming every which way, all times of day and night. Over here, over there. Everywhere! They want me for my body, my sweet, sweet body! How's a girl supposed to get any sleep? Oh, I'll be old and tired without my beauty sleep. Whoe- O... M... G!"

The girl's face lit up at the sight of the Jolly Ranchers clutched by a poor, slack-jawed Ryuko. Shouting out her delight, she grabbed them and pulled them inside, taking Ryuko with her.

Ryuko gasped in surprise as she was twirled into a chair. She sat down heavily, her hands frantically gripping the armrests, as she watched Mako eat the candy like sunflower seeds; a handful was thrown in and rolled around a bit before the wrappers came flying back out again in bullets of spitty cellophane. Nervously, she looked around the room. It was ill-lit and cluttered, but it looked like it could be homey with a little cleaning.

Mako, her ecstasy in the candy subsiding a bit, resumed her pseudo-frown, (though her mouth was still full and bulging) and pointed a finger at Ryuko.

"Who are you and who sent you here!?" she boomed with surprising depth. Ryuko blinked.

"I'm... uh... Matoi Ryuko... Jakuzure Nonon. I called earlier...?" The round-headed girl's face softened so suddenly it reminded Ryuko of butter in a microwave. Mako jumped into her lap and wrapped her arms around her neck and squeezed so tightly Ryuko thought she was going to die right then and there.

"Ohhh, yeah," Mako sighed happily, throwing her weight back so suddenly that they were both catapulted out of the chair and onto the carpet. Mako almost hit her head against the coffee table but paid it no mind, releasing Ryuko to roll to a sitting on her knees. "Ryuko, I remember! I can help you with the thing for your thing! Miss Nonon said that deal with the biz... I don't..." she looked confused for a moment, waving a hand over her face as if dispelling a cloud of uncertainty before hopping up and smacking her hands together with a resounding clap.

Ryuko sat huddled on the floor with her mouth open and her eyebrow raised.

This kid must be on... something.

Her mind suddenly flashed to several moments that she sewed impulsively together. The insane, clearly (so she thought) drug-induced behavior, the glitter on the business card, and the remark Mako made about people wanting her for "her body." Ryuko went bright red as she juggled with the thought.

If Jakuzure set me up with some... hooker to get me out of the office I will gut her like a-

"Mako!" She shouted suddenly, getting the attention of the girl who had begun amusing herself by twirling on sock-feet on the glass top of an end table. Her focus broken, she almost careened into a grandfather clock before diverting at the last minute to twist into a salute.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Why did you say people wanted you for your body?"

Mako relaxed again and took Ryuko familiarly by the hand, leading her into a back room.

"Because they do."

Ryuko gulped nervously, starting to tug at the hand on hers.

"But what you *mean* ?"

To her great relief, the small, dark room was full to the bursting with computer monitors, some flickering out their lines of white code, others with paused internet games and movies. Mako let go of her hand to smash a pair of headphones over her own ears.

"They want me..." she lowered her voice to a whisper, looking around furtively as she conked herself on the head with her knuckles, making a sound not unlike a coconut. "for my brain."

"But..." weakly, Ryuko raised a finger. "You said body..."

"Heh?" Mako looked confused, cocking her head to one side. "My brain is part of my body, you big dumb!"

For the first time in a good while, Ryuko laughed. Partly from surprise, mostly from relief, but all the same it was a good, heavy, gut-twisting laugh that until that point she didn't know she desperately needed. Good-naturedly, Mako joined in, spinning a few times in her swivel chair and wrapping herself up in the cord on her headphones.

Ryuko wiped her face, her mouth still open in the laugh though the noise had receded.

This won't be too bad.

She didn't remember her first time. Or her second, really. There was a hazy, indeterminate period where all she remembered was abstract dread as she came to understand her fate, what it mean when her mother said,

"Satsuki, wait for me outside my room."

She remembered with great clarity, however, the day she said "no." It hadn't been a haphazard rebellion, a desperate shriek for mercy. No, even as young as she was, then, she already had the will to make a proper defiance.

She had stood outside the door to her mother's room, nervously clutching her clammy hands together. Fidgeting in a desperate attempt not to start pacing, she set her small mind to the task at hand.

I'll just say "no." I mustn't cry. I'll just say it... and, she struggled with the idea of whether she should run away afterwards. While her conscious knowledge of the appropriate gestures for a power-struggle were as yet underdeveloped, her instincts told her not to flee. No, I won't run, I'll just stand there and say it... besides, she'd just catch me...

Satsuki couldn't bring herself to think of what would happen after she said the forbidden word. All she knew was that she needed to say it, to set herself apart from her mother's lewd activity. She shuddered violently at the sudden remembrance of the hands prickling over her skin, of her mother slowly introducing her to the sexuality she was much too young for.

She knew she didn't deserve it.

Father told me she was evil. This is what evil people do. Satsuki set her mouth into a firm line. I won't let her make me evil, too .

A sudden brush of white past her downcast eyes startled her, then, and her stomach convulsed as she realized her mother had swept

past her into the room beyond, leaving the door open in a silent, deliberate command.

Come in .

Satsuki forced her hands down to her sides, taking a slow breath. She stepped into the room, her feet, bare underneath her dress, feeling the thick white carpet. The room was lit only by the light from the bathroom, where Ragyo attended to her nightly toiletries.

"Undress," she said, their eyes meeting in the mirror, "And get into bed."

Glancing at the neatly made bed in the middle of the room, Satsuki wrestled with herself, making sure her voice wouldn't come out as a raw squeak. She set her legs, forcing them to stop trembling, and balled her fists.

"No."

"No?" Ragyo set down the washcloth she was using to wash her face and turned towards the main room, the brilliant radiance of her hair filling the poorly-lit space. Satsuki gulped, but held firm. To her great surprise, her mother chuckled.

Languidly, Ragyo reached out a hand and flicked off the bathroom light so that only her own luminescence lit the room. Walking slowly and in deathly silence, she approached her daughter, slowly stripping off her own clothes. Forcing her expression to go dead, Satsuki neither broke eye contact nor moved an inch, though as her mother approached and began to tower over her, her animal instincts begged her to look away, to smile her submission, and hopefully slink away unharmed.

No, she admonished herself even as fear threatened to make her blood boil. I have to see this through.

Ragyo stopped suddenly before her, now completely naked as she looked down on her daughter with a crooked grin. At best, Satsuki came up to her bellybutton, so she had to crane her head back to continue to defiantly meet her mother's eyes.

"No." Satsuki said again, for good measure, her voice booming even in its unbroken youth. Ragyo took her suddenly by the jaw, tilting her head farther back and brushing her fingers against her throat. Resisting the unbearable urge to flinch and shudder, Satsuki held her gaze as she breathed unsteadily through her nose.

"You've made yourself weak, you know." Ragyo stated coolly, suddenly shifting her grip so she held Satsuki by the top of the head. Swiftly, she drove her knee into her daughter's chest, forcing her to double over as her body trembled with the coughs she couldn't release. Softly, her mother brushed the hair away from her back to get at the buttons that held her dress around her. Satsuki heard rather than felt the garment drift to the floor.

"You said no, you won't undress, but here you are," Ragyo purred as she slipped off the last of her daughter's clothes. "Undressed." Biting her lip, Satsuki held a hand over the bruise forming over the bone of her sternum. Her mind was screaming with panic and pain but all she could do was stare blankly at her mother.

"You said you won't go to bed." Taking a fistful of soft black hair, her mother picked her up and tossed her easily onto the mattress. "But look at you, in bed. You've made your intentions clear, but you've also made it clear how utterly weak and pathetic you are. You said 'no,' but you can't stop me. Sad."

Satsuki whimpered a little as her mother straddled her and pinned her arms over her head. Lightly, her mother scraped her nails down the girl's heaving stomach as she leaned in to whisper,

"Next time you tell me 'no,' make sure you're strong enough to follow through."

Satsuki gasped as the bindings over her face were roughly removed, shaking her from her half-conscious state of hallucination. The light blinded her, but instead of squinting, she kept her eyes shut. Despite the tactic, she couldn't help feeling disoriented as the cuffs around her limbs clicked open successively.

"I see I'm not getting through to you." Her mother's voice shrieked in her ears after hours of perfect silence. Her hands jumped a little as she went to cover her ears, but they stilled shakily as she forcibly kept them down. After a short while, Satsuki opened her eyes, struggling to focus on the blinding white blur before her.

Ragyo sat beside the bed, fingers steepled as she frowned. Satsuki was not responding as well as she should. The sensory deprivation, instead of filling her with fear and making her unbearably sensitive, had somehow made it easier for Satsuki to take her mind away and drift out of reach. Despite her disdain for the human breed, Ragyo couldn't help but be impressed with her daughter's force of will. A lesser creature would be crying in her lap by now.

Loosening her frown a little, Ragyo took pleasure in the thought of her child sniveling for comfort in her arms, but in the meantime she was frustrated.

And bored.

There's only so much fun you can have with someone who can't see or hear you, someone who is so clearly not paying any attention. Kiryuin Ragyo was not a creature to be ignored. She needed to be seen, for her power to be felt.

She needed time to devise a new tactic. Ragyo moved to the bed and took Satsuki's head, levering it forcefully down onto her lap. Satsuki stared back at her with utter disdain, her eyes a very pale blue. Her pupils had shrunk so small that they were mere pinpricks of black in the center of her irises, giving her a weird, alien look.

"What a failure you are, Satsuki," her mother murmured, running her hands through Satsuki's bangs, smoothing her eyebrows with her thumbs. "What am I going to do with you?" Drunk with power, Ragyo suddenly flipped her over and pressed her face into the mattress, effectively smothering her. Satsuki didn't bother to squirm. Her defiance, her refusal to allow her own mother to feel her writhing under her grip, enraged Ragyo. Her lips pulled back over her teeth and her breathing grew ragged before she suddenly snapped out of her delirium and sat back, folding her arms over her chest. Satsuki moved her face to the side to breathe and appraised her with one expressionless eye.

"Well, we'll see when I get back." Ragyo sighed, her voice suddenly light, airy. With incongruous playfulness, she gave Satsuki gentle spanking before rising and sweeping out of the room.

Sighing in relief, Satsuki sat up and raked her fingers through her hair. Despite her mother's conviction that the past few days had done nothing to wear her down, she was feeling exceptionally fragile. Her mind felt flaky and crusty, like the top of old baklava. She had receded into her memories to avoid the prison of the black box, but the pain her mother had inflicted had forced her mind to synch with reality such that she could only relive the worst experiences of her life. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and almost casually considered her body. She was badly bruised and her breathing was tight over her ribs, but she deemed herself fit for action and stood slowly, fighting off the sparks that began to float at the edges of her vision.

I need food. And tea.

She wrenched the door open and slid out into the hallway, heading towards her room. She ignored the mousy-looking maid who squeaked and held the linens in her arms over her face when she walked by.

And clothes, I suppose.

Somehow, she got into the kitchen sometime later and sat at the counter nursing her tea, trying to kick-start her brain back into action. She was struck with how incredibly random her mother's attack had been.

Have I been careless? Does she know?

She shook her head and formulated her next move. Gritting her teeth, she sat up suddenly as she remembered in a flash what she had been doing the day before.

Matoi!

Genuine fear flooded her veins as she remembered Nui's hunt and the vulnerable state Satsuki had left Ryuko in.

Good God, she may already be dead. I have to find her.

In the back of her mind, Satsuki knew she was acting uncharacteristically, that regularly she would constrain her search to a few discreet phone calls; but the thought of Ryuko dying in Harime's cruel hands dried her mouth and set her head spinning. She consoled herself with the notion that going out for a brisk walk would do her good, and that she wasn't merely indulging herself.

Everything is still in place. I can afford a side-interest.

She pushed down the sudden bloom of heat in her chest and strode hastily to the foyer, pausing to snatch Bakuzan out of the umbrella stand.

She chose a pea-coat with a deep inside pocket to shove her sheathed blade into and was struggling into it with tight, sore muscles when Kuroido suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Miss Satsuki," he announced, his small mustache bristling, "Your mother has informed me that you are not to leave the house in her

absence." Annoyed, Satsuki drew herself up to her full height and turned to face him.

"Oh?" she sneered, her haste giving her bile. "Are you going to stop me?"

"No, silly." Nui called from her seat on the stairway banister, swinging her legs carelessly. "I am."

Harime Nui closed her one eye and giggled.

Okaaaaaaay, way too many character expo chapters in succession. I swear there'll be actual plot in the next chapter, bear with me!

Anyway, I'm sorry if my Mako is an abomination unto the Lord. I understand her the least out of everyone, but I'm working on it!

Chapter 9

I just discovered that there's a book out there called "Amish Vampires in Space." I must have it! Also, I now ship Nui and Mason Verger. The perfect godawful sibling tag-team!

Nui slipped off the banister, not caring that, if the whole world's population was standing behind her, they all would have seen her underwear under her atrocious pink skirt. Satsuki brought her heels together sharply, shoving her hands into her coat pockets and jerking her chin up to look down on her sister.

"I see that making a mockery of the unfortunate is now part of your design portfolio, Nui," said Satsuki, breathing into her chest and expanding her ribcage, "Hm. Purple. It doesn't look good on you."

"I wanna see what you look like all purple, Kiki," Nui drawled, reaching up to snap her new eye-patch up onto her forehead, revealing the still-raw hole where her eye used to be. Huffing, she gripped her hands behind her back and crossed her legs at the ankle, swaying over to lean against the wall behind the landing. "Huh. Who's mocking the disabled now?"

Ignoring the gruesome spectacle, Satsuki lidded her eyes and tilted her chin minutely.

"If you're going to wear your name like a badge on your face, you deserve to be mocked." Though mildly curious, she hadn't the temper to ask Nui about her eye. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." She turned to grasp the handle of the front door mere feet from where she stood, but before she could make the small motion, Nui was across the floor and inches from her face, blocking the door.

"Didn't you hear butler-man? Mama said no." Nui gurgled, taking a small leap to place a peck on her sister's tightly-drawn lips. Satsuki

sneered and jerked back, wiping her mouth roughly with the back of her hand.

"I owe you no pretense, Harime," she snarled, "Get out of my way." Nui's one eye twitched, her mouth twisting into a smooth grin. She stepped suddenly into Satsuki's personal space, pushing her back when she refused to move.

"Oh, so you let Mama do what she wants with you because you have something to gain, you whore? Don't think I don't hear when Mommy makes you moan like the little slut you are." Satsuki narrowly avoided the hand lashing out to grab her by the ear, dodging smoothly, hands still in pockets. "Why don't you make those noises for me, hm?"

"You are a poor lover, Harime Nui," she answered coldly, the truth adding bite to the retort. "Why do you think everyone who's had the misfortune of taking you into their bed immediately loses their phone and inexplicably needs to leave the country? Have you ever had a second date?"

"Aren't you just adorable?" Nui hissed, eyes darkening, her heels clacking as she backed her sister against the outer edge of the balustrade. "Why don't I show you what a *fantastic* fucker I am?"

"You've always had a way with words, haven't you?" Satsuki kept her demeanor cool even as Nui gripped her by the throat, though her mind was racing. She was in no condition for a fight. She had never held out longer than ten minutes in a fair match against Nui. Then again...

I have Bakuzan now, and she is newly vulnerable to her left.

She immediately squashed the idea.

I can't squander the element of surprise. It's not time yet. I cannot reveal my secret until I am shown the Original.

Satsuki sighed, closing her eyes as Nui raised a fist.

I hate this.

She removed herself from her resigned dread and was about to enter her unfeeling plane of stoic existence when a blur on the banister caught her attention. She didn't have time to turn her head before a screaming mass of hair and muscle crashed into her, sending her into Nui and toppling them both to the floor. In the split second in which she had a squirming Nui pinned under her superior weight, she instinctively drove the heel of her hand into her sister's left eye, grinding into it like a pestle. Nui screeched like a banshee and thrashed on the ground, sending her sister head-over-heels.

Satsuki looked up, the sudden bout of adrenaline coursing through her dispelling any more thoughts of submission. She balled her fists, her limbs scorching with fire as she prepared to fight. But the Banister-Blur was already there, picking her up and throwing her thoughtlessly over its shoulder. It was yelling, shouting into her ear, and she was shouting back, screaming her confusion and lust for violence. Even as she did, however, a tiny voice in her head said in its cool, amused voice,

Well, that was unexpected.

A few days earlier:

"What do you mean, 'you can't'?"

"I'm sorry, Ryuko!"

She did look sorry, big, shiny tears glossing her equally big eyes. Surprised at the reaction, Ryuko backed off, waving her hands and muttering.

"Okay, okay! What have we been doing all week, then?" To Ryuko's great dismay, Mako wasn't really into video games, despite her

aptitude for code manipulation. She had spent hours playing the only game in the house as Mako clattered away at her keyboard, and she was really, *really* sick of it. Ryuko was in her eighth year on the farm in Harvest Moon, and *still* hadn't shorn any X wool. She had sworn to herself that if she sheared her sheep one more time without results, she would straight up murder it. "What am I paying you for? Wait, am I paying you?"

Mako shrugged, making a nonplussed noise before sighing and slipping off her chair to the floor in a squiggling motion that could only be described as 'melting.' She held her hands towards the ceiling, elbows locked, as she intently considered her fingernails.

"It's like the pentagram in there!"

"The what?" Ryuko sniggered at the malapropism, but maintained her indignant expression. "You mean the Pentagon?"

"Everything, everything is on lockdown so tight a candelabra couldn't fit through!"

"C-candelabra?"

"Through that buttery needle of salvation!"

"Eh?" Ryuko shook her head and ignored the unfathomable metaphor, setting her mind to the task at hand. "I remember, like, five years back, REVOCS stock crashed 'cause of some hacker. It was a big deal. On the news..." Mako sat up suddenly, an idea sparking as clearly as if a lightbulb had flipped on over her head. She leaped into her chair and started slapping at keys. Interested, Ryuko looked over her shoulder and was surprised to find lines of code appearing on the screen, apparently caused by Mako's haphazard keystrokes.

"What are you doing?" But Mako was in her own world, typing away and humming a cute little song to herself. Ryuko groaned and threw herself back into her chair, itching restlessly at her side. Deciding

almost instantly that she couldn't sit for one more second, she jumped back up and grabbed her jacket.

"I'm going out. I'll be back with food."

"Potatoes and molasses, if you want some, oh, just ask us." Mako sang, swaying in her oblivion. Ryuko shook her head, feeling some incongruous affection towards the girl before slipping out.

Mako met her at the door and presented her with two flash drives.

"Here you go, goodbye, have fun!" she crowed, shoving them into Ryuko's hands and making a good-natured attempt to push her out the door.

"Wait, Mako! What? Calm down!" Ryuko muscled her way into the flat, holding the bag of food over her head as Mako shoved at her. Quickly, she pulled out a burger and tossed it gingerly to Mako. Eyes lighting up, Mako gave up on her quest and began devouring the sandwich, moving to the living room to flop onto the couch. Sighing, Ryuko sat in the armchair and considered the drives in her hand. "What are these for?" She asked, taking a bite of her own burger.

"Well, that first one is to help you break into the Kiryuin mansion and that other one is-"

" *What!?*" Ryuko inhaled a chunk of meat and immediately coughed it out again, spraying the coffee table with bits of lettuce and ketchup. Embarrassed, she grabbed a napkin and started cleaning up her mess but kept her eyes fixed on Mako, who nodded and took an enormous bite.

There was an awkward period as Ryuko finished cleaning and just sat on the floor and stared at Mako while waiting for the other girl to finish chewing. *Should I say something?* Ryuko thought. *Nah, I'll just sit here and look shocked and appalled. That'll get her to talk.*

It didn't. Mako finished eating and (not before snuffling around the empty paper sack for more food) smiled and made a shooing motion with her hands.

"That's right, just stick it in and we're good to go! You got this girl!"

"Mako, what are you talking about?" Ryuko stared at the geek sticks still in her hands, her heart beating furiously. She hadn't bargained on any breaking and entering (maybe Mako was joking. She had to be joking.) but at the same time a furious little voice screamed at her to do it, to do whatever it took to find her father's killer.

It was Nui. It had to be. Ryuko's blood began to boil and she closed her fist over the piece of plastic. She could still feel her father's blood on her hands as she tried to save him, the unbearable heat of the fire. She loved him, but hardly knew him. Now she would never know him. Her mind drifted to the violin case parked by the door, what was inside.

Whoever has the other half... Her speeding thoughts slowed to a standstill. She needed an in. She needed *information* .

No one's going to just give it to me. I have to take it myself . The languid thought shifted and clicked suddenly as her mind flitted to Satsuki. Ryuko shook her head. She hadn't heard from her in over a week, not since the fire. *She's not interested in helping me* . Ryuko snapped back to reality and realized Mako was talking.

"-into the security. The cameras will be mine!" Mako made walky fingers in the air. "And then you can sneak around until you find a computer and put the blue one in, okay? Okay."

Ryuko would later wish that she had paid attention more carefully, but she was already out the door, slinging the instrument case over her shoulder.

*Why am I so damn stupid? Did someone drop me on my head?
What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Ryuko stood in the last copse of trees that surrounded the Kiryuin manor before the lawn opened into a perfectly manicured lantana garden. And then the house itself. She had left her bike on a deer-trail a few hundred yards away, and she wanted nothing more than to slink back, get on it, and quietly drive away.

Harime New-Age Fuckbucket's looking for me anyway. Ryuko thought, scratching at her scalp. *I could just declare myself... yeah, and end up dead in a river.* Though she was as ready for a good scrap as the next girl, Ryuko knew when she was outmatched. She shuddered as she felt the ghost of Nui's icy fingers going up her shirt. She clutched her jacket to herself and sprinted to the wall of the manor, slipping into a niche that held a security box. Feeling very competent and cool, she wiggled it open and took a peek inside, gloved hand poised to shove the flash drive into whatever port she could find.

To her dismay, there was nothing vaguely USB-looking in the box. There was a bundle of wires, a keypad, and a circuit board. Nothing else. Her breathing grew labored as she struggled to find a place to put the key.

Damnit, damnit, damnit! She had timed the rotation of the outdoor guards, but hadn't accounted for a glitch. There was no time for a glitch! As she heard the tramping of a pair of boots round the corner, she frantically searched for an opening, any opening. The boots were growing louder. Ryuko imagined she could smell the sweat on the man's face as he grew ever closer to her hiding spot. Frantic, she gave up and threw the useless key into a bush and removed her gloves to shimmy like a squirrel up a gutter-pipe to the second floor, sweaty hands providing ample grip. She jimmied open a cracked window and squeezed in just in time for the guard to pass without noticing her.

She breathed a sigh of relief before realizing that there was a corner camera in the room and it was looking right at her. Ryuko grinned nervously and waved at it before sprinting out the door.

Out, out, out, why am I so fucking stupid?!

Ryuko ran down the hall, sure she could hear an alarm sound from deep within the mansion. She tripped over a mop bucket, sending dirty water all over the blue-veined marble. A few maids gaped at her, and Ryuko immediately felt bad for undoing all of their hard work, but she kept running, haphazardly throwing open doors and looking inside. She heard men's shouts from behind and she dashed into what looked like a home office.

Why did I wear this leather jacket? I look like a total perp! I could've played this off as "innocent prankster," but no, Ryuko, you had to look cool!

She looked around the room, eyes scanning for escape. Instead, her eyes lit on a laptop computer resting serenely on a mahogany desk. For a split second, Ryuko paused in the doorway, unsure, before she leapt across the room and grabbed the computer, shoving it into her backpack before dashing out into the hall again to run for her life.

She ran faster than she ever had before in her life. It was if the fear pounding in her stomach and throat were giving her wings. To her peripheral delight, she quickly outstripped her pursuers, who were clearly confused by her random door-opening. The large hall led to a balcony over the foyer, and Ryuko went to skitter out the doors, run like a demon to her bike, get the hell away, and barf into a trashcan, when a familiar voice froze her blood in her veins.

"Why don't I show you what a *fantastic* fucker I am?" Nui's voice was high-pitched, as always, but there was undeniable menace.

"You've always had a way with words, haven't you?" Ryuko narrowed her eyes at the sound of Satsuki's voice, daring to peek through the parallel shafts of the balusters. Nui had her sister by the

throat against the bottom of the banister and was getting much too close for Ryuko's comfort.

Ugh, Ryuko shuddered, *She's just gonna let her do creepy shit to her?* Ryuko remembered the impossibly strong hand on her neck and her blood ran cold. She stared, frozen in horror, as Nui leaned into Satsuki even as her hand twisted into a fist.

There were shouts behind her and Ryuko was shaken from her mental snare as she recalled that she was being pursued. The only way out was through that door, and Nui was right in her way. Taking a deep breath, she did the first thing that came to her mind.

She slipped down the banister, head first, screaming like a wild animal, hoping to grasp the elusive element of surprise. To her great relief, Harime's eyes (eye? Ryuko noticed the eye patch out of the corner of her eye and filed it away for future consideration) were closed and her face was pressed into her sister's hair. Ryuko smashed into them both, sending them sprawling into the foyer. There was one single moment of consideration as Ryuko looked between Satsuki and the door, and, as Nui screamed and writhed on the ground in pain, Ryuko decided.

She owes me answers, she thought, not willing to admit even to herself that she wanted to play hero. With a strength she didn't know she had, she caught Satsuki around the waist and hoisted her over her shoulder, yelling at her to hold still as she wrenched the door open and ran as fast as she could into the woods surrounding the Kiryuin estate.

So Matoi Ryuko kidnapped a supermodel.

Yay, plot! Sorry for the delay. Exam week was rough. Some girl bit me in the library, and that's not a euphemism. She literally put her teeth into my arm. Geez...

Are any of you following InoBato? Holy shirt! At first I was like, "Hm, Sayumi is kinda like a normal high-school Satsuki, but no, I won't force her into a box... That's not fair." But then we meet her little sister and she looks so freaking much like Ryuko! Being all cute and normal and annoying little sister! Ahh, no, Trigger! Not in my feels! What are you doing!?

Chapter 10

Wow. Chapter ten. I don't think I've ever written such a long work. Well, I did write that 90,000 word original work in high school but it was basically trash so I doubt it counts. Hmm. Writing is fun. I miss it when I'm busy! I hope you guys enjoy reading this as much as I do writing it.

Faster. Faster. Faster.

Heavy. Heavy. Heavy.

Ryuko's mind had disintegrated into this searing mantra, using the words like a pot-lid to force down the sizzling, bubbling panic. She ran, tearing to the left to find the wooded path where she left her bike, intent on outstripping the lilting screech of Harime's rage. It was growing louder. The gravel scattered between the gardens crunched and skidded beneath her trainers and Ryuko felt like she was choking on her own breath as she took several extra steps to regain her balance. The weight on her shoulder was unfamiliar and oppressive, forcing her to lurch unsteadily through her regularly smooth gaits.

Satsuki hissed through her teeth as Ryuko's shoulder pounded unfeelingly into her aching body. Her mind worked slowly as she acted on impulse. Shifting her weight so she could unclench her hands from Ryuko's shirt without face-planting into her butt, Satsuki brought her hands together to pound them down into the lower back below her. Mid-swing, however, her brain finally overpowered the throbbing rawness of her fighting instinct, and, working against the original inertia of her fists, she managed to turn the punishing blow into a firm bump.

If I incapacitate... no, if I slow her down, Nui will have her. Satsuki frowned ferociously, sharp lines slicing over her forehead as she

thought. Around the corner of the house, she caught a glimpse of gold speeding over the shrubbery behind them. *I can't run away again.* An unbidden streak of fear wormed over her, but she roughly shoved it aside. *The plan. I can't afford this.* Taking a deep breath and bracing her abdomen against the punching of Ryuko's shoulder, Satsuki pinched her ear and tugged on it sharply.

"Matoi, don't stop running, but -"

"Yeah," Ryuko gasped, tightening her grip around Satsuki's legs as she finally reached the trees. "No shit."

"- Put me down!" Surprised, Ryuko slowed slightly, still sucking down huge lungfuls of air.

"You want me to leave you here?"

"Yes!"

"Hell, no!" Doubt crept into Ryuko's mind. *She... she doesn't want... is it... consensual?* She resisted the urge to gag as she cast a glance over her unoccupied shoulder. She was sure she saw something move, and she could still hear Nui cackling like a maniac behind them. Gulping, she set her mouth into a strict line. *I'm not putting her down.*

"I didn't ask for your help, Matoi!"

"Tell me again when I give a fuck!" Satsuki suddenly tightened her grip on Ryuko's ear and threw her weight into a fierce drag at the sensitive cartilage. Ryuko howled as her neck snapped to the side and her momentum sent her into a skidding spin. She fell to her knees, her jeans tearing over the uncultivated ground as Satsuki squirmed from her grip. As quickly as she escaped, Satsuki appeared at her elbow, pulling her up and shoving her on, tucking one hand into the breast-pocket of her coat to grip something inside.

"Go. Go!" she yelled, her hair glinting in the dapple of the trees as at swung around her shoulders. "I won't be able to hold her off for long." Satsuki's breath came in a frustrated whine as she saw that Ryuko refused to budge. She was standing with her fists clenched and feet apart, breathing heavily through her nose. A determined look had settled over her features and the red streak in her hair seemed to glow.

"No. I'm not going without you."

"Damn you, Matoi! I don't need your help!" *She's ruining everything!* "Just go!" From between the bushes, Nui's face appeared. It was grinning sweetly.

"Hi, guys!"

Satsuki dug one foot into the ground and cracked the other into Harime's face, the force of the blow coupled with Nui's already massive speed sending waves of shock up into her hip. Flying back with what sounded like giggling, Nui disappeared back into the foliage. Replacing her foot on the ground, Satsuki turned and considered Ryuko. She hadn't budged and had raised her fists. *I can't waste any more time*, she realized with steadily increasing annoyance. *She's... we're both going to die*. Growling, Satsuki grabbed Ryuko's hand and started running.

"Let's go, then." Ryuko grinned wolfishly at that, but the expression turned into a look of queasy uncertainty as she caught a peripheral glimpse of the blond banshee throwing her shoulder into a tree instead of taking the time to go around it, splattering the ground with powdered wood and foam from her mouth.

"Ready or not," she screeched, still laughing as she tore the wood apart with the whirlwind of her bare fists. "Here I come!" Her voice rose into an impossibly high tone, and the birds in the trees surrounding began screeching back at her, egging her on. Ryuko braced her trainers into the loamy earth and sank into a sprint, quickly passing Satsuki. With a strength and speed she realized

impossible from some dark corner of her consciousness, she shifted her fingers over Satsuki's wrist and dragged her along behind her.

Almost... There.

Ryuko crashed head-first against her motorcycle, wasting no time clambering aboard and forcing the key roughly into the ignition. Just as she was yanking Satsuki onto the bike behind her, a rough hand grabbed her by the bangs and ripped her head back, hot breath misting over her skin as Nui seemed to float over her, her purple eyes wide and bloodshot, boring into her body with such unrestrained hatred and lust that Ryuko absolutely froze, her head swimming.

She regained her wits, however, as Nui recovered from her leap, bracing herself against the ground as she jerked against her hair, trying to pull Ryuko to the ground. Just as she felt the pressure increase against her scalp, she hunched into the yanking, gripping the handlebars and furiously gritting her teeth as she felt her hair beginning to tear from her scalp. Blood ran down her nose and into her eyes and she shouted out a grating yell. Despite her death-grip on her bike, she was losing her seat.

I lost. Oh, God...

The air suddenly hummed, smoothly broken with sharp metal, and Ryuko's head snapped forward, free. With an instinctive kick, she cracked into Nui's throat, sending blood choking out of her damp lips now pulled into a small 'o.' Ryuko punched at the accelerator, a feral growl tensing her body. She gasped as she felt Satsuki curl her arms tightly around her waist, gripping the front of her shirt, but instinctively curled into the contact, rolling her back into Satsuki's stomach. With a jolting whirl of skidding rubber, they were racing over the uneven ground, safe. Ryuko sighed heavily, nearly collapsing over the handlebars in relief.

Agitated, Satsuki sheathed Bakuzan and replaced it in her coat, looking over her shoulder at the Kiryuin mansion growing ever

smaller in the distance. She wondered how far they would get before she had a chance to get back. Sighing, she pressed her face into Ryuko's neck to keep from being stung by the wild hair lashing against her face.

"You idiot," she muttered, too quietly to be heard over the roaring of the wind and engine. Despite the trouble Ryuko was causing her, she couldn't suppress the bloom of heat that surfaced just under the skin of her stomach.

She's trying to... save me? The thought was so adorably ridiculous that she couldn't help but chuckle. No one saves the indomitable Kiryuin Satsuki. She suddenly found herself nuzzling against Ryuko's shoulders, and she jerked back, appalled with herself. *What... was that?* Blushing feverishly, she set her mouth into a firm line and turned to other difficulties. Twisting again, she just managed to catch a last glance of the mansion before it slipped out of sight. *I can't... I can't be running away again. I can't afford this.* She resisted the urge to throw herself onto the side of the parkway. Resigned, she let her eyes drift shut and pinched the bridge of her nose.

I can handle this.

"Hello, Mother."

Of course, it wasn't really her mother. Not in any human sense. But what else do you call the one who gave you your body, your life?

Well, in her case, her new body, her new life.

Ragyo lifted a hand to softly stroke the supple, glowing threads. They were softer than silk and hummed lightly at her contact, the entire orb pulsating with a demure orange glow. A spark of pure pleasure shot through her as she stepped into the body of the original life-fiber, the threads parting like smooth water before her. The shifting of the material sounded like the whispering of hundreds of ancient voices, softly purring their wisdom into her ears. She

smiled softly, letting the tender threads slowly wrap around her, embracing. Her mind slipped slowly into a state of transcendental meditation, floating, letting the fiber feed from her.

This is the end of humankind. Such... beauty. She saw with superb vividness the planet bursting into bloom, its cool blue surface splitting to reveal the layers of red and orange beneath. For a moment it pulsed in an ever-increasing sphere of brilliant color before the edges wilted and faded, losing their color to the harsh frigidity of the heavens. Finally, then, perfect silence. A silence in which she was one perfect crystalline note, ringing out its joy for all eternity.

The note was singular, and yet hummed with a soothing harmony. Ragyo was suddenly pulled back into herself in a motion that stoked her senses into giddy ecstasy, and she was struck with a sudden wet warmth as she remembered that even as a god at the end of time, she would not be alone. In her wisdom, she had created another like herself to share in her singularity.

Within the cocoon of the primordial fiber, her hands began to drift slowly over her own body, never tiring of exploring the well-trekked landscape, but in her mind she was still at the end. They were folded, folded together within the silky creases of absolute domination. Ragyo reached out to touch her face, tracing the planes of bone perfectly identical to her own, dragging the tips of her fingers through the hair braided into the weave of the cloth. Black hair, blue eyes. White hair, red eyes. So perfectly alike and yet utterly contradictory.

It is fitting .

Thesis and antithesis crashing together, finally melding into one. Light and darkness at last existing together, screaming out their unity in a flicker of everlasting fire.

Satsuki...

In reality, her hands began to skim lower across her own belly, teasing out wild, volatile sparks, but in her vivid dream she reached out to caress her daughter's velvet skin, relishing the feel of muscles pulled taut by the strands of their shared web. She breathed her in, eyes humming shut as she grazed her teeth against her neck, spreading a hand at the small of her back to fully feel her shudder and arch. A sudden dampness struck her cheek and her mouth tweaked into a soft smile, still pressed into the smooth contours of her collar. She followed the damp line carved into the skin, rubbing her cheekbone against the planes of her face before pulling back to see the tears pearling in those exquisite eyes.

A variety of expressions would have pleased her. Wonder, disbelief, reluctant pleasure. Hopelessness, defeat, tired acceptance. Even a mad spark of defiance would have made her laugh. Despite her hopes, however, she was met with a look that instantly killed the delight bubbling in her stomach, turning her into a dead mass of hot, dry rage.

Disgust. Utter, contemptuous disgust, a pitying sneer turning up her mouth and crinkling into her eyes. Ragyo opened her mouth, but no sound came out, and instead she lashed out to grab Satsuki's face, trying to force her to change the disdain written indelibly into her features. Sick, slick horror oozed out through her very being as she realized there was nothing left. There was only her and this creature who hated everything she was.

The fantasy began to crinkle at the corners, tearing and shredding as she lashed out and the original life fiber began to constrict around her to force her flailing to cease. In a moment she was still, her body relaxed and her mind a stone vault. Slowly, she swam to the surface, turning to step onto the ground as a hazy frown creased her features.

This won't do. Languidly, she reached out a hand to the oversized ball of yarn behind her, and it sent out a tendril of red thread that materialized into a white, double-breasted suit. It dropped

senselessly into her hands, dormant, and she rubbed the lapels absently with her thumbs.

I think it's time Satsuki had a wardrobe change.

She flipped the cloth over, stroking the seams, imagining the alterations she would need to implement. Epaulettes, maybe? A short skirt, gold trim? It was always a shame when attire needed to be fitted. Ragyo shrugged, resigned, all prior emotion obliterated. *It can't be helped.* Sensing a presence behind her, she turned minutely.

"Nui." Her voice rumbled in her chest. "I need your help with a new design. Do you have your sister's measurements?"

"Oui, Mama," She muttered, but her tone took on a queasy aspect, and she fumbled nervously with something in her hand.

"Nui..." Ragyo turned completely and her eyebrows drove into a sharp 'v.' "Where is Satsuki?" Nui giggled nervously, suddenly clamping her hand over her mouth and looking away.

"She's... gone?"

Crack . Without another word Ragyo drove her fist into Nui's face, throwing her back into the wall. The whole room shuddered and the original life fiber groaned, glowing feverishly as it suddenly began producing suits at a terrific rate. Unheeding, Ragyo flashed like a streak of lighting and beat her knuckles into her daughter, over and over, faster than the eye could follow.

"It's not, augh, mama! It's not my fault!" Kiryuin Ragyo didn't reply, grabbing Nui by the hair and pounding her into the floor, her face horribly expressionless.

"Where is she?" Her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

"I don't - No, NO! I don't know! Ryuko took her!" As suddenly as she had attacked, Ragyo stopped and sat back on her heels, intrigued.

"Matoi Ryuko? She just keeps stringing you along, doesn't she?" Absently, Ragyo reached out to pat Nui in the head. The girl flinched but held still, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth and smearing blood onto her cheek.

"I'm sorr-"

"Shut up." Quirking an eyebrow, Ragyo plucked the item that Nui had managed to hold onto out of her fist, examining it curiously. It was a lock of hair, scraggly and sloppily braided together. Tilting her head, she brought it closer to her face, stroking the streak of bright red, admiring its peculiar texture. "Matoi Ryuko, is it? How very droll." She laughed suddenly, the sound creaking out of her like an old house settling on its foundations. Her hair increased its brightness, spilling its multicolored light into the distant corners of the vast room. She stood and invited Nui to do the same, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I have work for you, my child."

La vie est drole.

If anyone is still reading this, please stop and write a story. The quantity of fics for KIK has been *abominable*, truly abominable. Go, be free! Write so I don't have to!

And yes, it is hard to write all this creepy crap. Why do all my plot-moving ideas have to have Ragyo in them? *bemused*

Chapter 11

I took a jaunt through Tumblr the other day (something I don't often do), and I was suddenly and forcefully reminded that there are some legitimate *big dogs* in the world of KIK fanfics. There are people out there with names like Goethe With an Umlaut, Gingham Dog, and Death to Dr. Mario... heh... or some such. People out there who write like witch doctors. It made me feel incredibly... small. It's a good but definitely humbling feeling.

Anyway, chapter 11, woohoo!

She swung to a pattering stop outside Mako's complex. Still gasping for air, Ryuko swung her leg over the seat of her bike and clutched at her knees, bending over to rest her weight on them as she struggled to gain control over her physiological reflexes. Her stomach heaved as she grappled with the thoughts that squirmed and tore through her head like a centipede crawling in her brain.

What have... there's nowhere left to... there's nothing... no one...

She licked her lips, eyes raking the surroundings as if expecting members of the REVOCS security detail to appear around every corner. She all but hissed at an old lady, and in response she eeped and dropped the garbage bag she was clutching before shuffling away, muttering about "kids these days." Still, despite the shock, a firm, square voice called out to Ryuko from behind her eyes.

You did the right thing.

You saved her.

Ryuko turned as she felt the bike shift beneath her. Satsuki swung her leg to mirror Ryuko's position, clutching at her own knees, grappling with her own panic. Something best described as

"accepted terror" roiled in her chest and stomach as she leaned forward, looking at the ground.

What can you do?

How can you save her ?

Satsuki turned her head to sneak a peek at Ryuko and found that the other girl had done the same. They locked eyes, and for a moment each stared inquisitively at the other, the same question on both minds.

What the hell is your problem?

Ryuko broke the tension by suddenly and unwillingly laughing. Satsuki frowned and leaned back, throwing her head up. Despite the imposing intention of the gesture, Ryuko only laughed harder, snorting a little as she struggled to get herself under control.

"I'm sorry..." Ryuko hid her mouth behind the back of her hand, eyes crinkling as she released her nervous energy in uncontrolled mirth. "Your hair..."

Satsuki's hands flew to her head and were met with one continuous rat-nest. Pinking a little, she struggled to smooth out the wind-swept tangles as she continued to look at the still-giggling Ryuko from the corner of her eye. "You look like a... ah... ha... a pirate!" Tears of hysterical mirth were gushing from Ryuko's face now. Satsuki frowned, giving up on her attempts to make her hair stop looking like tarred spaghetti.

"Stop it."

"I- I can't!"

And she really couldn't. When she thought about it later, she couldn't quite figure out why it was so funny. Satsuki sighed, waiting for Ryuko to stop. Suddenly, her hand flew to Ryuko's forehead,

stopping suddenly to hover an inch or two away from touching her. Startled, Ryuko went silent instantly, her eyes going wide and glassy as she struggled to see the hand that was too close for her to focus on. Softly, using only the tips of her fingers, Satsuki stroked the short, fuzzed tuft of hair that stuck up off of Ryuko's forehead where her red streak had been.

"You look rather 'special' as well," she murmured before shuddering and pulling away. The black hairs were soft and pleasant to touch, but what was left of the red streak felt strange. An inexplicable but oddly familiar sense of dread passed through Satsuki when those crimson wisps brushed against her skin, and she quickly twisted her hands together on her lap and moved to stand. "I should go."

Ryuko, struggling to subdue the blush that had torn from her stomach to her ears the moment she had felt Satsuki's fingers in her hair, stood as well, eyes widening.

"Go? But... no! Where would... why? We just got here! You can't go!"

"I..." Satsuki paused, licking her lips and shifting her eyes upwards as she struggled with her intentions. She knew what Ryuko meant but hadn't said: *Don't go back. Why would you go back there after I saved you?* In her mind, Satsuki smiled, but the gesture didn't reach her face. She envied Ryuko her innocence, her confusion, her utter lack of bitter pragmatism. She couldn't express her thoughts, she couldn't tell her what she was feeling, that she could never be free until she had done her job, that she was grateful to Ryuko for her sentimental rescue but it may have undone her, that there were things Satsuki never wanted her to understand. She couldn't, so instead she hid behind the dictator she kept on call within. Drawing herself up tall and staring balefully down at Ryuko, Satsuki sneered, hating herself.

"What I do is of no business of yours. You'll do well to keep your mouth tightly shut or you'll betray the fool who knocks around in your empty skull."

Ryuko's mouth opened, then shut with a sharp clack of teeth, her face reddening in shame and anger. As Satsuki turned to the street to hail a cab, Ryuko grabbed her by the shoulder, fisting at the material of her coat. Satsuki whipped around and grabbed the wrist that held her, suddenly jerking to a stop as she realized Ryuko's forehead was pressed to hers. Her peripheral just managed to catch sight of bared teeth before her eyes flicked up to match Ryuko's intense glare. Both defiant, they pressed their heads together, trying to force the other to give ground. So they stood as if frozen for a long moment.

Ryuko struggled with her thoughts. She had no words to express herself. The hurt at Satsuki's stinging cruelty translated to anger, masking her confusion and betrayal in swirling crimson. *Who are you? Why do you want to go back there? Are they right? Is there something wrong with you? Why do I waste my time on you, why do I want you so much? Why are you so goddamn, fucking beautiful?* With the beginnings of a growl, Ryuko opened her fist and shoved at Satsuki's shoulder, simultaneously jerking her head back and away. She pivoted to turn her back, shoving her fists into her pockets and shouting over her shoulder.

"Yeah? You think you're hot stuff, huh? I'm surprised you can even talk around that fucking silver spoon in your mouth. God, what did I ever see in you?" She turned back around suddenly, her raw disdain breaking a little to reveal the emotion hidden beneath. "I thought... back then... You were the coolest, greatest thing in my life. I never gave up looking for you, I thought we would've been friends. God!" Furious with herself, Ryuko smashed her fist into her own eye, grinding it brutally as she struggled to contain herself. Cooling slightly, she set her mouth into a hard, dirty line. She felt as though the great, sparkling mystery she had held in a precious corner of her heart was suddenly garbage, squirming with maggots and glazed over in slime. Something deadened in Ryuko's chest - there was no Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny was dead, and Santa Claus was just some drunk. Slowly, keeping her head down, Ryuko raised an accusing finger to a frozen Satsuki.

"Heh. I thought you were something special, some great mystery. Well, mystery solved, Sherlock! You're just an asshole - a huge, shitty asshole. Remind me to kill myself before I waste my time on you again!"

The words sliced through Satsuki like a hot knife, and a spasm of pain in her chest nearly had her whimpering. She wanted... she wasn't sure what she wanted. No, she wanted contradictory things. She wanted to rush forward and speak her heart, her intentions, to confide her lifelong suffering, to cry. She wanted to hold back, lock her steel castle, to turn and walk away, to scoff. She wanted Ryuko to hate her, love her, scorn her. She wanted...

Recognizing the destructive hurricane of thought and emotion, Satsuki stopped suddenly, body stiffening as she gathered the thoughts together and threw them into a remote corner of her mind, locking them up tight. *Calm. Use your head*. Still, she couldn't bear to see Ryuko standing there, defeated in her defiance. The mortar between the stones of her mind-castle began to crumble... something slipped through, and Satsuki moved before she thought.

Ryuko startled as she felt Satsuki's arms wrap tentatively around her, awkwardly patting her back. *Holy shit, she sucks at hugging*. Still, Ryuko felt her anger fade as she instinctively hugged back, the heat of Satsuki's body burning indelibly into her skin. Ryuko pushed away, clearing her throat, as she felt her blush begin to rise again.

Embarrassed, Satsuki looked away, pinking as she resisted the urge to slap herself. Instead, she cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry. That was... rude. Rude for me to say that, and... to..." She straightened herself, her shoulders aligning to create perfect right angles. "I apologize."

The silence drew on, long and painful. Ryuko snapped her mouth shut and rubbed the back of her neck as she attempted to smother the gremlins in her throat that begged her to start spewing questions.

"So... uh. You wanna come in for coffee?"

Satsuki sighed, shoulders rounding in defeat.

"Tea, please."

"Madam?" the voice was quiet, demure in every respect, almost shrieking in the high-pitched tremor of fear. It annoyed her.

Ragyo turned slowly, careful to make sure a burning beam of red light fell across his eyes. Across the table, Nui happily hummed her own theme song, obliviously sewing together a pinned pattern of white and gold. Ragyo brushed the silken fabric with the tips of her fingers as she turned. Sleepily, one orange eye slid out from under the blue tie before promptly shutting with an inaudible groan.

"Yes?"

The servant trembled in his perfect black suit before holding out a tray to her. On it lay a little purple flash drive. Ragyo plucked it up as one would pluck the strings of a harp, bringing it close to her face for scrutiny.

"This was found in the gardens, Madam. We believe it was left by the intruder."

"Has it been accessed?"

"Not yet, madam." Incongruously, he made a low bow, as if he had just realized that he had forgotten to upon his arrival and was hoping that it wasn't too late.

"See to it." Ragyo dropped the bit of plastic back onto the tray, enjoying the sharp silver *ping* it created. "Pay particular attention as to whether its source can be traced."

"Yes, madam." He all but scuttled away.

Mako was surprisingly pleased with her houseguest.

"Kuvira!" she screeched, quivering like a dog that can't decide whether to run away or rush forward. "You're... in... *my* house!? Ahhhh! So coooooool!" Satsuki unconsciously backed into a corner by the doorjamb, grinning in what she thought was a placating manner. Mako apparently made a decision and leapt, fully intent on grabbing and smushing Satsuki's face, and, Ryuko, recognizing the dangerous tilt to Satsuki's eyebrows, grabbed Mako out of the air and held her by the waist under her arm.

"She gets... excited." Ryuko tilted her head to address a squirming Mako as she settled her gently on the floor. "Mako, this is Satsuki. I invited her in for tea." Mako tilted her head, confused a little.

"Sa - tsu - ki? Ki? Oh, Kiki, I get it! Hello! OMG! I can't believe you're here! Everyone univocally agrees that you're Kuvira." Mako flipped her arms around in a mockery of metalbending forms. "'Cause your face is all like 'merr' but then your eyes are all like 'bam' and everyone goes 'aaaahhh!' I don't think you're evil and dumb like her, though. I bet you could make one mean dictator speech, if you were a dictator. Like, I can just see you yelling all inspiring-like on the top of a tower or something. Oh my butts! My BF said he knows you but it's all very hush-hush! I'mma take a picture! Cheese!"

Ryuko grabbed Mako's phone just as Satsuki began to rumble deep in her chest like some wild jungle animal.

"Mako! Calm down!"

"I am perfectly calm! You calm down, Korra!"

"What the hell are you talking about!?"

Mako started to gesticulate wildly, as if trying to explain over sixty episodes of a television series in one fantastic feat of physical

prowess. Clearing her throat, Satsuki leaned into Ryuko, speaking in her ear.

"Can you direct me to the facilities... and to a comb, maybe?" Knowing she would have another breakdown if she looked at Satsuki's hair for too long, Ryuko quickly pointed her to the bathroom. Murmuring her thanks, Satsuki disappeared, and, after putting a kettle on the stove to boil, Ryuko caught Mako's attention.

"Hey, Mako, check what I got." Furtively peeking at the closed bathroom door, Ryuko slid the stolen laptop out of her backpack and handed it to the other girl. Mako cooed (apparently forgetting that a stolen computer wasn't in the original plan) and threw herself backwards onto the couch, opening the laptop. Uncomfortable, Ryuko fidgeted and danced on the balls of her toes, biting her lip. "Uhh, not here. In your workspace, maybe?" *I wonder if Satsuki would even care...* Regardless, she definitely didn't want Satsuki to know that she had looted her house with Achaean abandon. Mako shrugged and complied, shifting into the back room. Still dancing and periodically looking at the bathroom door, Ryuko followed her.

Inside said bathroom, Satsuki coaxed her hair back into glossy submission with a comb she found in the mirror cupboard. Sighing, she went to place it back where she found it when she noticed the disinfectant hiding behind a furry toothbrush. Carefully, she picked it up and uncapped it, studying the white paste inside for an inordinate amount of time. Finally, making her decision, she crossed her arms at the hem of her shirt and pulled the article over her head, wincing as the motion pulled at the muscles in her shoulders.

She examined herself in the mirror as if she was some kind of alien species, softly ghosting her fingers over the harsh purple bruises. Noticing that her ribs showed more than usual, she tried to recalculate how long she had been... there. Surely not more than a day or two? Gently patting her own stomach as if in reassurance, she squeezed the antiseptic onto the tips of a few fingers and applied it to the clawed welts in her skin.

She must be planning to do it soon. Or... at least she has other plans for me. In any case, I won't model again anytime soon. The thought both filled her with dread of the unknown and a tingling pleasure. Satsuki hated modeling, especially the derogatory remarks Nui insisted on making any time she had a shoot. Sneering at the memory, she turned around and looked over her shoulder to apply the cream to her back, but twisting her arms around and looking in the mirror proved to be much more confusing than she originally thought. When she needed to move her right arm down, she instead moved her left one up. In the end, she had to close her eyes to do it properly. Finally finished, she slid her shirt back over her head, rolling her shoulders until the cloth stopped sticking to the disinfectant.

For a long moment, she considered taking her pants off to take care of her thighs, but the thought of looking at her own lower body inexplicably filled her with dread, making a cold, thin sheen break out on her skin. She huffed, pushing the absurd feeling aside and tossed the antiseptic back where it belonged, leaving her pants where they were.

I'll remember this if I get gangrene and have to amputate my legs. The rather macabre image that came to mind of hopping around without legs, cursing the day she didn't apply antibacterial cream, made her smile a little as she pushed open the bathroom door.

To her surprise, she was alone, the kettle shrieking on the stove. Absently, Satsuki wandered into the kitchen to turn off the gas and pour the boiling water into a mug she found hanging over the sink. Disinclined to root around in a stranger's kitchen for tea, she sipped the hot water and settled into a chair. Peeking around over the rim of her cup, but catching no sight of Mako or Ryuko, Satsuki considered her escape.

I could just leave. No problem . She settled into the soft chair and set her mug aside, leaning her head back. *I should. Just as soon as...*

Finally overcome by her body, Satsuki barely fought the sleep that quickly overtook her.

"Weird. There's nothing on it. No password, no programs. It has all its factory settings... but..." Ryuko threw her head back and groaned. It would be just her luck to steal a brand new computer for Intel purposes.

"But what?"

"The hard drive's almost completely full. I just gotta find where this baby keeps her goods. Don't worry, Ryuko!" Mako threw her arms unexpectedly around Ryuko's neck, making the laptop fly from the desk. Ryuko leapt to the floor to catch it, cradling it softly to her chest as all the wind was knocked out of her.

"Thanks... Mako" she wheezed, reaching up to place the precious bit of machinery back onto the desk before curling her hands under her neck in little dinosaur claws as she gasped for air. Despite her predicament, she appreciated everything Mako was doing for her. No need to be rude.

A few minutes later, Mako handed her the computer.

"Got it. Pretty well hidden. Like, crazy good." She stretched elaborately, yawning with tongue curled inwards like a cat. "G'night. You two can stay if you want, but I need my sweet beauty rest!" Mako went to hurl herself from the room, a toothbrush already somehow in her mouth, when Ryuko snatched at her hand desperately. At the word 'two' Ryuko remembered that Satsuki was still out in the living room, waiting to hear why she had been kidnapped. Panicking, Ryuko clutched at Mako's hand.

"Mako," she whispered, "What do I say to her? I kidnapped her!" Intrigued but not fazed, coconut-head knelt on the floor in front of Ryuko, pushing her toothbrush to one side of her mouth.

"Why?"

"'Cause... I though... I thought I was saving her, but..." Ryuko gulped, fidgeting. "She wasn't doing anything to stop her... Nothing! Is it just easier? Maybe she's not really that creepy. Maybe Satsuki's the creepy one? I don't understand and there's no way in hell I can go out there and have a conversation with her!"

"Maybe..." Mako paused before putting on a 'guru' voice. "She's waiting and listening for the time to strike. She's a good earthbender." Ryuko sighed, giving up on Mako and waving at her to go to bed. She gave Ryuko an unsolicited squeeze before wishing her luck and disappearing.

Mustering all her courage, Ryuko stomped fearsomely into the living area, only to deflate immediately when she found Satsuki asleep in an armchair, a cup of steaming water on the endtable next to her. Sighing, Ryuko raked a hand through her hair and plopped onto the couch, opening the laptop. For a moment she stared at Satsuki and her long limbs lying loose and relaxed in the plush burgundy recliner. Licking her dry lips, Ryuko tore her eyes away to study the one scrap of intelligence she had managed to gather.

A hidden file was open before her, but at first it looked like there was nothing of importance. There were no documents, no encrypted files, just videos and pictures. Hundreds of videos. Thousands of pictures. Already bored and disappointed, she clicked the window into preview mode, turning the picture icons into thumbnails. Her stomach jerked and Ryuko looked away hastily as her eyes were assaulted with an altogether uncomfortable amount of bare skin.

Fuck me. Did I actually steal REVOCS' porn collection? Damn it! She was about to slam the lid of the machine shut when greedy curiosity convinced her to open a photo. Before she could stop herself, she had double-clicked a random thumbnail.

Shit, that's some kinky porno . Her eyes perused the image lazily, unconcerned, when a realization punched her forcefully in the gut.

That wasn't just some greasy actor tied to the bed, faking pain as her head was yanked back by the hair. It wasn't just a set up in some sleazy shop to help sex-deprived adolescence abuse themselves. It was real... it was Satsuki.

Ryuko gasped for air as she recognized the smooth lines of her jaw, her neck. Her eyes lingered for a moment upon the swell of her bared breasts before, immediately ashamed, Ryuko flicked her head away, pinching at the bridge of her nose. She looked back just as quickly, whimpering and gripping at her hair as something (she didn't know what) bubbled under her ribcage. Frantically, Ryuko tried to soothe herself.

Calm down, shit. Fuck, Ryuko, calm down. It's not real. It can't be. She's a model, she probably does this kind of shit all the time. In that particular frame, Ryuko couldn't see the owner of the hand that held Satsuki by the hair. Hastily she exed out of the photo, impulsively clicking on another.

She was curled up with her mother, arms held protectively to her chest as she glared into the camera with unabashed hatred. Ragyo's arms held her to her, fingers creeping suspiciously upon the inner aspect of her daughter's thigh. Ragyo's smile was soft, matronly, pressed into Satsuki's shoulder. Ryuko nearly cried out, pressing the back arrow on the viewer repeatedly and with such rapidity that her eyes barely had time to register the photos before they were whisked away to be replaced by another.

Fuck. Fuck. Oh, God! She couldn't see much, but she could see enough. Ragyo. Nui. Satsuki. Fingers. Hands. Handcuffs. *This can't be real.* Bruises. Blindfolds. A little girl in a white nightdress. *It might... it might not.* Click, click, click. Squirming. Struggling. Teeth. Blood. Vicious smiles in soft lighting.

Ryuko stopped herself, one hand grabbing the wrist of the other. The flashing images stopped and one image glared back at her: She was on her knees, the photo taken from above. One shoulder lifted against the pressure of steel cuffs, she stared impassively into the

lens, bright blue eyes sparkling and naked skin glowing in the orange blaze of firelight.

Ryuko's brain struggled to objectify, to forget, to tell itself to treat these pictures as she would those in a dirty magazine. It wasn't real, how could it be? So you might as well enjoy yourself. Ryuko locked her hands together and shoved them between her thighs, curling over herself as she put as much pressure as she could onto her hands. *No, no, no* . She was racing, falling. What was she to think? Was there anything *to* think?

A soft sound in the corner of the room had Ryuko's head whipping around. Satsuki had shifted in her sleep. All pretense fell away in Ryuko's mind. The person in those photos was real, alive, and right next to her. It was real. It was fucked up. It was devastating.

Ryuko screeched suddenly, dashing the computer to the ground. Her thoughts were a mindless fuzz of static and ire. Startled by the noise, Satsuki jerked up, crying out a little.

"Ah, what's wrong? Shh... shh, calm down. Are you okay?" Still groggy, she sat forward in her chair, reaching a hand out to a distraught Ryuko.

Looking up suddenly, Ryuko stared at her, breathing heavily, hands in the middle of tearing her own hair.

"I..."

Ryuko wanted... she wanted it all to go away. Suddenly, all Ryuko wanted to do was soothe away the pain of harsh years that told on Satsuki's face as she sat, sleepy and unguarded, before her.

"What? Ryuko, what?"

Her hands moved without her consent, reaching out suddenly to cup her face. Tired, torn, Ryuko pressed her lips to Satsuki's, wanting

nothing but to heal. Still, alarm bells sounded in her brain even as she nearly fainted under the sensation of that mouth.

Ryuko, you monster. You're so fucked up.

Yaya!

Chapter 12

Sorry for the long wait! Here's an extra long chapter to make up for it.

Ryuko jerked back before Satsuki could react, nearly biting her own tongue off. Still, she could barely breathe, barely see, her whole body aglow with the pleasure of a long-repressed fantasy yet haunted and aching with the horrors scorched into the front of her mind.

Oh, God, what have I done? Why would I do that to her, after... Ryuko bit her lip, tears springing to her eyes as her cheeks burned hot with shame. *I'm one of them... No, NO!* Sudden bile ripped up from her stomach and Ryuko rushed to the bathroom to empty her stomach.

The picture of surprise, Satsuki sat up, back perfectly straight, her brain frozen. Very softly, she pressed the back of her hand against her tingling lips.

Was that my... first kiss? Soroi had always reassured her from a young age that it didn't count if you didn't want it, and although she wasn't sure she believed in "doesn't count" anymore, Satsuki felt a sudden bloom of heat under her skin as she asked herself if she wanted to kiss Ryuko. A sudden, hot shudder passed through her and Satsuki rounded her shoulders, ears warm.

I... I wasn't expecting it at all. I couldn't have wanted it. Satsuki shook herself out of her daze, one corner of her mouth twisting. *Still a lip virgin after all, I suppose.* That thought was a little too much, too sickly sweet, for her taste, and the other corner of her mouth joined its fellow to create the firm line of frown.

"Ryuko...?" she called, softly. Concern began to lace through the webbing of her thoughts as the silence from the bathroom dragged on through disproportionate lengths. Sighing, Satsuki raked her eyes over the room, noticing the bruised but still-working laptop on the floor by Ryuko's recently-vacated seat. The lid was open slightly but facing away from her, and sudden curiosity sparked to an insistent roar. For one single moment, Satsuki had no troubles, no intricate plan, no questions, no past - she was merely a being that lived to see what was on that laptop, to see what had sent the rough and carefree Matoi Ryuko running for the toilet.

Ryuko, in the meantime, sat with her face in her hands, seeing tears drip onto her knees without feeling them. She felt as if her whole being was shuddering, her organs trembling inside her. An image, raw and burning, would flash before her eyes, and to her great shame her body reacted with sudden arousal before the fire was quickly doused with a flood of horror and illness. She gripped her hair and pulled, teeth gritted as she rocked slightly on the toilet lid.

What the fuck did I see...? That couldn't... and then I? Who-?
Ryuko's vision suddenly cleared and she sat up, raking a hand through her hair. Everything, all the emotion, the thoughts, the tears, dragged to a gritty halt as Ryuko closed her mind like a steel trap. Nervously, she wiped her face with her sleeve, knowing full well that the dam she had built within herself could crack and overflow at any second.

Standing suddenly and wiping her hands on her jeans, Ryuko sniffed once, hard, and yanked the door open. Her heart froze in her chest, clenching into a tiny ball of panic, as she saw that Satsuki had shifted to the couch and had pulled the laptop up with her.

Her first thought was: *Oh, goddamn it, I am so screwed.*

Then: I'm just gonna kiss the hell out of her. I'll just take her hair and never let it go and I'll use it like a scarf and just bury my face in it when it gets cold and kiss her whenever I want and then she'll smile

and I'll say 'you never smile' and she'll say 'now I have a reason to' and then we'll just hug forever and ever but then-

The third thought had to manually shove the second to the side with a unique blend of utter terror and raging guilt.

MATOI, MOVE!

Ryuko somehow managed to yank her expression out of the doofy grin that had melted all over her face and leapt. As casually as she could, she dropped sideways over the laptop and shut it with her side, pretending she was just leaping from the bathroom to the couch for no reason. Propping her head on her hand, Ryuko looked up at Satsuki, trying to force a relaxed grin.

"Hey, so..."

The smile wilted from her face as Ryuko stared up into Satsuki's drawn face. She had gone so pale that from her lower vantage point Ryuko could see the blue of her veins under her jaw line.

Too late...

"Wait, Satsuki, it's not-"

Slowly, so slowly, Satsuki stood, her eyes dark in her hardened face. The words on Ryuko's tongue died as she began to feel so incredibly small. The dam in her mind began to crack and leak and she bit down on her now-trembling lower lip.

No, please don't. Don't.

"You were in my house. Is this why? Is this why you broke into my home, journalist?" Ryuko winced but could say nothing, her tongue a cinderblock in her mouth. Satsuki's lips parted slightly as she struggled for air, her chest aching as another small part of her died, drawing her closer to her inescapable breaking point. For one pure moment a flash of hurt scrawled across her pale features before

being swallowed up by the stony hardness of her face. Ryuko almost howled, almost died, at that expression, and quickly she scrambled to sit up.

"No, Satsuki, no, it was an acci-" Ryuko grunted and choked as Satsuki's heel drove onto her chest, pinning her to the couch.

"You may address me as Miss Kiryuin... No. Kiki, I am Kiki to you." Ryuko sobbed once, willing the tears to stay inside.

"I swear..."

"It was an accident? An accident that you snuck into my home in broad daylight to steal my mother's computer? You were just looking around and it fell into your hands?" Satsuki scoffed and pushed harder into Ryuko's sternum before releasing her, turning her back. Suddenly, she twirled back around, cheeks bright red.

"And then... after... after you satisfied your sick fascination with me, with... my... my awful... " Satsuki paused, eyes deadening. "*You kissed me!?*"

"I just... I just wanted to help."

Satsuki slapped her. She didn't bother to lean down for better reach, she just swung her hand down and around to connect sharply against Ryuko's cheek. Ryuko didn't look back up at her, choosing instead to gnaw on her own knuckle as she stared at the print on the slipcover.

"Give it to me." Brooking no argument, Satsuki held out her hand for the computer. To her great surprise, Ryuko picked it up, closing it and clutching it to her chest.

"No."

Satsuki's breath caught, but she cleverly disguised it as a slow, intimidating drag of breath. To Ryuko, she seemed to grow

impossibly taller and whiter to the point of shining. The silence dragged on, and so Ryuko gripped the machine tighter and licked her lips.

"I'm taking it to the police." As soon as she said it, Ryuko flinched at herself. *Why did I say that? I'm not even going to ask her what the hell is going on? What the fuck do I know, anyway!? Damn you, Ryuko!*

Satsuki laughed in a short, unpleasant puff, then went to slap Ryuko again. Ryuko dodged and stood up, cheeks red and breath short.

"You have anything to say?" Ryuko started, angry, standing on her tiptoes. Satsuki blinked, shocked.

"Do I? Do I have anything to say, you miserable cretin?"

"Yeah!" Ryuko steeled herself, puffing out her chest. "What are you doing... I mean, what are you even doing?!" Despite her lack of eloquence, Satsuki understood Ryuko's meaning exactly. At another time, she might have softened, might have offered a bit of reassurance, but, to put it shortly, Satsuki was pissed. Baring her teeth, Satsuki grabbed Ryuko by her collar and smashed her into the nearest wall, sending tacky pictures of cartoon rabbits flying everywhere. Despite the shock of the impact, Ryuko refused to release the computer in her grasp and just stared defiantly up at Satsuki. "How, dare you? How... *dare* you?"

"You've been following me around. I had to save you because you don't know when to keep your nose to yourself. You broke into my home, stole from my family, kidnapped me, *kissed* me, and you have the nerve to ask me if I have anything to say?!"

Ryuko tried to pay attention. It was all true, Satsuki was making some good points, but Ryuko couldn't help but be distracted by Mako's sudden appearance into the room. Trying to be discreet, Ryuko nodded and bit her lip while looking over Satsuki's shoulder, watching Mako open the pantry door and gesticulate wildly before

silently going on all fours behind Satsuki's knees, giving her the thumbs up and a wide grin.

Satsuki had her iron fingers on the computer now, and for a long moment Ryuko considered letting her have it. Her habitual defiance, however, refused to let this opportunity slip through her grasp and she suddenly put her shoulder into Satsuki's stomach, shoving her backwards with all her strength.

Mako hooted like the head cheerleader as Satsuki tripped over her and tumbled into the pantry, sending boxes of cheez-its and fruit gushers tumbling onto her head. Moving faster than thought, Mako closed the door and locked it with the bolt on the outside, turning just as rapidly to high-five a very dazed Ryuko.

"Yay, we did it!"

"Mako... why did you do that?"

"I'm just helping you kidnap that girl! You didn't try very hard the first time." She beamed.

"You... thought I kidnapped her on purpose? No, and you were okay with that?"

"Sure! Share the love, that's what I always say!" Ryuko had to nearly physically stop herself from thinking about the implications of that reply. Instead, she took a deep breath and leaned her shoulder against the pantry door.

"Will you talk to me now? Just talk? Please, I want to help!" The low register of the reply made the door vibrate under Ryuko's hand, making her shudder and lean more heavily against the door.

"Fuck you."

"I'll let you out if you agree to talk to me."

"Yeah, c'mon, it's okay!" Mako added, sounding like she was trying to entice a puppy with a milk-bone. There was a long silence and Ryuko rapped on the door, angry.

"Look, dipshit, you can let me help you or you can go home and get raped again, I don't care." As soon as the words left her mouth, Ryuko hated herself so violently that her body nearly rejected her soul and she would have died on the spot if she hadn't just then slapped herself hard in the face. *Goddamn it, Ryuko!* "Oh my God, I'm so sorr-"

An impact like a train hitting the door rattled the entire apartment, and a long, vertical crack showed through the door. For a single instant, one ice-blue eye stared through the crack, chilling Ryuko to the bone with its glare before disappearing again. Another impact struck the door and one of the hinges popped its bolt. Happily, Mako threw open the front door and crowed,

"Run, Ryuko! Run like the wind!"

Not knowing what else to do, Ryuko snatched up her backpack and her violin case and ran like hell.

Nine years ago:

Ryuko held her breath as she tiptoed into her father's study, shaking her dying flashlight as if to encourage it to keep trucking on. She wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for, but the idea of "off-limits" was utterly irresistible to her. Carefully, she looked over her shoulder before easing open the bottom drawer of the desk (to her mind, the most secret of places) Suddenly careless, she scattered its contents onto the floor, intent on perusing every scrap of paper.

To her great disappointment, the majority of it was statistical. Scrawls of letters and abbreviated jargon on boring sheets of massive graph paper. No doubt it would have been of intense interest to another scientist, but to thirteen-year-old Ryuko, it was a massive waste of

time. Yawning, she suddenly realized why it was a bad idea to stay up past midnight before a school day, and, suddenly filled with intense adolescent ennui, she carelessly shuffled the papers together to shove back into the drawer.

Her eye was suddenly caught by a tiny picture shifting from between two charts and fluttering to the ground. Snatching it up and nearly cackling, Ryuko brought it so close to her face that it nearly touched her nose, but then the shadow of her head blocked her flashlight so she reluctantly viewed it from a distance.

Is that... Dad?

The man in the photo was tall and unstooped, broad-shouldered and handsome - in a word, nothing like her father. Elements of him peeked through, however, in the red of his hair, the shine of his eyes, and the baby quirk in his rare smile. Ryuko couldn't help but smile back at him as she stared at the picture.

Wait a sec, is that me? It doesn't look like me. Did I ever look like such a prep?

A sudden flood of light startled Ryuko and she yelped, squinting, throwing the back of the hand holding the picture in front of her eyes. The photo was roughly torn from her grasp and Ryuko blinked nervously into the face of her livid father.

"Get out."

"But, Dad..."

"Get out before I lose my patience. You know you're not supposed to be in here." Despite his calm tone, Ryuko knew by the bulging vein on his beet-red forehead that she was in some serious trouble. "I don't want to see you again until you're back from school tomorrow."

"Dad..." she whispered as she skulked out of the room. "Won't you drive me to school?"

"You're old enough to take the metro."

"Why won't you play with me, Kiki?"

Satsuki didn't bother to look up from the blueprints spread across her desk.

"That really depends on what 'play' means today."

"Oh, you know." Nui leaned across Satsuki's chair, idly brushing her fingers through a lock of black hair. "This and that, getting into trouble together like real sisters."

"We are real sisters, Nui," Satsuki spared a glance to rake her eyes over Nui before returning to her desk, "At least I must assume so until more evidence surfaces."

"Always so funny..." Nui's fingers curled around Satsuki's throat, not yet bothering to tighten. "Silly Satsuki." Irritated, Satsuki shook her off, standing. Nui frowned, pursing her lips before closing her eyes noncommittally and rocking back and forth on her heels.

"Aren't you a little young for those heels?"

"Aren't *you* a little young to dress like a World War II vet?" Satsuki shrugged, stepping back to the desk to pick up her phone. Nui's fingers caught her around the wrist. Raising an eyebrow, Satsuki straightened, looming over her sister.

"Do you really want to do this, *imouto*?" Nui scoffed a little at the false affection, keeping her eyes closed. Her other hand took Satsuki by the elbow and gently steered her back into her chair.

"Nui, I need to call my architect- "

"Ugh, I hate your stupid school." Satsuki's sister pinched her ears between her fingers, pulling her head against the backrest of the

chair. "I hate it and it doesn't even exist yet."

"Mother has explained to you why it is necessary. I don't think she'd like to hear you complaining about it."

"Don't give me that. You love the stupid thing. You just want to move away and leave me all by myself." Satsuki rolled her eyes, frustration boiling in the pit of her stomach.

"That's not true. Now, I'm very busy, so if you could just-"

"Kiki," Nui interrupted her, leaning back, tugging on her sister's ears. "Help me with one of my outfits." Nui's eyes had closed again, a tiny, close-lipped smile spreading over her face. Satsuki sighed. It was always a little unnerving when Nui got this way. "I'll make it fit you just right, sew it into your skin, right along the seams so you wouldn't feel a thing." Her hands were rubbing across her shoulders now, pinching at the fabric of her shirt. "You'd never have to wear something like this again. I'd be sewn right into you."

"Stop it, Nui."

"Why are you always so cold? C'mon, don't be that way. Hm... my fingers are tingling."

Good god, Satsuki thought, *She's eleven years old. This has to stop*. Satsuki choked on her thought as Nui's fingers fumbled with the buttons on her collar, slipping inside. A roar of white static burst through her consciousness, wiping out all rational thought. Yanking her knees up to her chest, Satsuki jammed her feet against her desk, throwing her chair over backwards. She heard Nui shriek as the heavy wood crashed on top of her, followed by a sharp, brittle *crack*.

Rolling to the side and breathing heavily, Satsuki pulled the chair back upright and stared down at Nui, her chest dry and empty. Mouth open in shock, Nui stared down at her right knee, twisted into an impossible angle. Her open mouth suddenly twisted, squirming, and she started to scream, bawling like a baby.

Dazed, Satsuki stood and wrenched the door open and walked out, resisting the unbearable urge to cover her ears to escape from the horrible groaning of Nui's bones as they realigned themselves, each creak punctuated by a shriek of animal rage.

Satsuki was surprised when she found herself unscathed a few days later. She had a meeting with her mother to finalize the plans for Honnouji Academy. With a little under a year before the first term, Satsuki was beginning to feel antsy and nervous. This meeting had to go perfectly; she had everything to lose.

I'll appease Nui later, I must put everything I have into this project. Lovingly, Satsuki stroked the handle of Bakuzan, the massive sword her father had left her. *I will carry on your mission, Father, I'll do whatever it takes.*

A few minutes into her presentation, Satsuki noticed that her mother seemed distracted, frowning a little at each of her new points. Swallowing and shifting her stance a little, Satsuki paused.

"Do you have a question, Mother?" Kiryuin Ragyo leaned sideways into her seat, propping her elbow on the armrest and cocking her head to brush her own cheek with her fingers.

"The purpose of these schools, as we discussed, is to break down the more powerful resistance of the young through reliance on goku uniforms, is that correct?"

"Yes, as I mentioned earli-" Ragyo waved her hand, silencing her.

"And yet, all that is necessary for our final end is the widespread use of the REVOCs brand. Why are you going to such lengths, Satsuki dear? Is there something on your mind?" Satsuki's heart pounded heavily in her chest, but she kept her face composed. *Where is this coming from? She was completely on board a few weeks ago.*

"I believed it better to ensure our final success, Mother."

"Indeed." Ragyo stood, choosing instead to lean upon the desk. "And yet it has been brought to my attention that your scheme puts a pressing time restraint upon my workings. If I agree to your schools, then we absolutely *must* have one hundred percent of the market under control within the next three years; such a percentage I cannot guarantee. Seems unnecessarily risky, don't you agree?"

"I assure you, I would be perfectly willing to-"

"Stop. The matter has been settled. Your sister has approached me with more flexible alternative." Even as her heart beat with agonizing panic and horror, Satsuki narrowed her eyes. *Nui, your revenges are growing more sophisticated.* "You will finish your education with your peers. When the time is right, you will model for REVOCs." Ragyo paused to rake her eyes up and down Satsuki's rigid body. "An altogether more dignified way to put your charisma to use, I think." Satsuki nearly sobbed as years of her work was instantly destroyed. "I'm sure you will be able to rein in that rather feisty demographic, I have complete faith in you."

Satsuki bowed, trying to hide the tears that had begun to form beneath her lids. She mumbled her acceptance and turned to go, but her mother was before her, gripping her by the lapel of her uniform and backing her up to sit on the edge of the desk. Bakuzan was extricated from her grasp and her mother scrutinized the sheathed blade.

"A silly memento, now that it lacks purpose."

Crack . Ragyo handed her the last few feet of the blade, broken off the hilt but still firmly sheathed. "Still, I am not a mother who can refuse her child. Take this, do what you want with it." Numbly, Satsuki took the end of her broken blade, automatically placing her thumb over the open end of the sheath so that the blade would not slide free. She felt as though her heart had also been broken over her mother's knee. A shuddering breath was all that she could manage. Ragyo chuckled, pushing her towards the door. "I'll expect you at dinner - we can discuss more then."

Outside her mother's office, Satsuki was met by her sister's sweetly smiling face.

"How'd everything go with Momma?" Roughly, Satsuki shoved her out of the way, muscling her way to the staircase into the foyer. Nui's smile swiftly melted into a sadistic leer.

"You'll regret that, Kiki."

"I don't doubt that I will."

Think. I need to think. Absently, she slid what was left of her most treasured possession into the umbrella stand. The front door slammed behind her. *I can't come back until I have a new... a new.* The tears started suddenly, and Satsuki began to run - she had to run. There was nothing left to do. *I'll come back when I can...*

Not knowing where she was going, Satsuki bought a ticket onto the metro. She didn't return home for dinner.

Ryuko wasn't sure why she didn't just get on her bike and drive away. A large part of it might have been that she had left her keys in Mako's apartment, but she had a nagging suspicion that she didn't actually *want* to get away. She didn't dare turn around, but she could hear Satsuki's footsteps racing behind her, growing closer.

Damn those long legs. Zigzagging into a nearby park, Ryuko struggled to keep her balance with both arms locked tightly around the laptop. *Where can I go, goddamn it?* she was just crossing a bridge when she was tackled from behind. Ryuko fell onto the cobbled bridge with a heavy thud, still scrambling for purchase even as her feet left the ground. Livid, Satsuki clawed her way up Ryuko's body and quite gracelessly sat on her, locking her fingers around the plastic casing of the machine.

"Give... it. To. Me!" Ryuko set her mouth and held on, just barely resisting the urge to stick out her tongue.

"What're you... afraid of, Kiryuin?" Satsuki stopped suddenly, releasing the laptop. Ryuko's arms jerked back at the sudden lack of tension, and she lost her grip on the slippery plastic. They both stared in transfixed awe as the poor little box of wires flew with a delicate twirl into the river. Returning her interest to Ryuko, Satsuki gripped her by the shirt, still sitting on her stomach.

"Afraid of? You have no idea what I'm afraid of, Matoi."

"Tell me, then, idiot!" Ryuko shoved her, jabbing her fist into her belly. "Just tell me."

"Goddamnit, Matoi, it's too late for that." And then suddenly their mouths were locked together, holding onto each other like there was nothing left in this world. Ryuko wasn't sure who had moved first, and although it was filled with sloppy passion and aggression, she was absolutely certain that this kiss wasn't stolen.

Their teeth bumped together as they struggled for a moment before melting into a slow, languid embrace. Ryuko pulled back a moment to randomly kiss Satsuki's cheek, and Satsuki growled and reclaimed her mouth, biting at her lip for daring to be so romantic. Ryuko chuckled against her mouth, but then finally pulled back, staring at Satsuki in utter astonishment, senses awash with surprise and unexpected pleasure. Ryuko melted at the sight of Satsuki's eyes glowing in the moonlight.

"You're adorable." Ryuko sighed.

Satsuki slapped her.

Mako sat on her couch in her footie pajamas, absently humming as she ate the fruit gushers that had fallen onto the floor.

Gotta clean this place up, she thought, staring intensely at the picture frames on the floor. She was startled from her reverie by a knock on the door.

"Two bits!" Mako sang, standing to open the door. To her great surprise, the door flew off of its hinges, blasting like a cannonball into the kitchen. Coughing at the dust, Mako squinted up at the girl leaning casually in her doorframe.

Woah, those are some huge pigtails...

"I think I found something you may have lost, cutie." Mako ignored her, choosing instead to stare at the broken front door lying next to the already destroyed pantry door.

What the hell am I going to tell my landlord?

Fighting, tension, fighting, tension, more fighting, more making out. That's how the Ryuko la Satsuki ship do :)

Chapter 13

Anyway sorry it's been four years.

Ryuko couldn't stop kissing her.

The softness of Satsuki's mouth and the way her hands roughly rolled into Ryuko's hair was intoxicating. Ryuko moaned into Satsuki's mouth as she grabbed for her neck and ran her tongue across Satsuki's bottom lip, seeking entry. To her surprise, Satsuki's teeth came crashing down on her tongue, savagely biting.

"Ah what the *fuck* Kiryuin?" Ryuko pulled back for a moment, indignation written across her face.

"Keep your *damn tongue* to yourself, Matoi," Satsuki growled, her voice sweeter and lower than any Sweet'N Low. Satsuki dipped her head towards Ryuko again, aiming to grab her ear between her lips, but Ryuko grabbed Satsuki's shoulders and pushed her away.

"You think you can just tackle me, push me to the ground, *bite* me? You've got another thing coming!" Satsuki sneered and snatched at Ryuko's hands.

"You think you can break into my house," she shot back, voice high and mocking, "kidnap me, *kiss* me?" She wrenched Ryuko's arms to the side and stood up, pushing Ryuko to the ground again as she tried to follow her. Ryuko fell with a soft thump onto her backside, pouted and folded her arms.

"Hmph."

Satsuki peered doubtfully over the side of the bridge balustrade into the dark water beneath. Ryuko watched her consider for a moment, and her eyes widened as she saw Satsuki take a deep breath.

Ryuko just managed to catch Satsuki's ankle right before she jumped over the side of the bridge. Satsuki squirmed.

"Let go!" she shouted, pushing her forearms against the railing to try to tip her center of weight over the side. "I wouldn't have to do this if you hadn't-"

"Laptops can't swim, Kiryuin! It's dead!" Ryuko clambered up Satsuki's body, grasping at her knee, her hip, and finally caught Satsuki with her arms around her waist. She tried to pull Satsuki back from the railing, but Satsuki refused to relinquish her grip on the concrete.

" *You're* dead," Satsuki growled, making the mistake of removing one hand to pry Ryuko's fingers away from her waist. Ryuko only clung tighter and shook Satsuki back and forth like a puppy with a chew toy. Stubbornly, Satsuki held onto the bridge with one hand while reaching back with the other to box Ryuko's ears. "There's always rice!"

Ryuko initially pressed her face into the back of Satsuki's head to avoid the sharp blows, but found herself suddenly overwhelmed by the scent of Satsuki's hair and the tickle of the soft strands against her cheek.

"Y-You're the dumbest smart person I've ever met," Ryuko stuttered, exasperated, trying to catch Satsuki's offending hand in her mouth. "Rice never saved shit!" Ryuko managed to catch Satsuki's hand with her teeth, and she quickly pulled Satsuki's pinky and ring finger into her mouth to keep her from escaping.

Satsuki growled and yanked at her hand. How *dare* Ryuko suck on her fingers, but her arm was now trapped over her head at an awkward angle and she wasn't quite certain whether Ryuko would sever her fingers with her teeth if she pulled too hard.

Biting through fingers is juuuust as easy as biting through carrots, Nui had told her while tracing the tips of her fingers with her tongue.

Satsuki wiggled her fingers experimentally in Ryuko's cheek, and yelped when Ryuko bit her. *Goddamnit, Matoi* .

"Fughnin bnch!" Ryuko yelled around Satsuki's hand, furious that Satsuki was *still* fighting her, and with a final heave of effort pulled Satsuki away from the edge of the bridge. They fell backwards together, and although Ryuko immediately released Satsuki's fingers she did not relinquish her grip around Satsuki's waist.

Satsuki seemed to go limp as Ryuko held her, finally defeated. Ryuko suddenly became acutely aware that Satsuki's shirt had slid up in the scuffle and that her fingers were clasped around her bare stomach. Ryuko was suddenly struck with how wildly inappropriate it would be to slide her hand over Satsuki's skin, so instead she lay still, smothered by Satsuki's soft weight and her own unbearable emotions.

Satsuki lay on Ryuko and stared at the ceiling of gray clouds above her. Ryuko was right, as much as she hated to admit it. Even if she did manage to root around in the river mud long enough to find Ragyo's laptop (and probably catch a brain eating amoeba), all the rice in the world couldn't recover the images saved inside.

The laptop was *gone*, and Satsuki was *dead* .

A sharp twinge of fear began to develop in Satsuki's stomach. Mere hours ago she had been chained to a bed for god knows what reason. In a knee-jerk reaction, her mind conjured images of what Ragyo was capable of if she actually had a reason to be angry. She knew better than anyone how long it took Ragyo to amass her personal porn stash. She *hated* that laptop, but now that it was gone... Satsuki considered stripping right in that public park and making Ryuko take pictures while she posed provocatively with a street lamp.

The absurdity of the image grounded her, and she was able to push away her fear only to be flooded with a dry, hissing anger. Instead of getting up, Satsuki ever-so slowly turned around on top of Ryuko

and placed an elbow on either side of her head. She watched Ryuko's throat bob as she deliberately positioned her hair in curtains around Ryuko's face so that the entire outside world was blotted out. Ryuko's wide eyes were like spotlights, illuminating her on this dark stage of charcoal hair.

Satsuki sighed and examined Ryuko's face, pausing to push Ryuko's hair away from her forehead and twiddle her fingers around the frayed ends of what was left of her red stripe. The texture of the red was markedly different from the surrounding waves of dark hair, and the feel of it between her fingers disgusted her instinctively. Satsuki released the strand and instead wrapped a hand around Ryuko's jaw, forcing her lips closer to her own. Satsuki reminded herself to be angry with Ryuko, distracted by the swell of her lower lip as Ryuko gasped harshly. Slowly, she lowered her head to Ryuko's neck, and followed the curve of her jaw and cheek with her nose before finally, finally reaching her ear.

"Matoi Ryuko," she whispered against Ryuko's earlobe. Ryuko squirmed, but Satsuki quickly pinned her with a thigh between her legs. "You have killed me." Ryuko opened her mouth to retort, but quickly closed it again. Instead, she averted her eyes and lay silently. "Ah, silence," Satsuki said, bitterly, "A marked improvement." Slowly, Satsuki backed away to sit between Ryuko's legs. She had thought she would have more to say, but the fight drained out of her before she could catch and hold on to it, so Satsuki instead stared at the palms of her hands in her lap.

Ryuko sat up slowly, unsure what to do. The sudden, unexpected contact with Satsuki's skin left her hard of breath, but she was desperate to hide her gasps for air. Releasing a breath as slowly as possible to hide a particularly large huff, Ryuko tentatively reached for Satsuki's upturned hands.

Shit, I've already looked at her porn and macked on her. Hand holding has to be on the table. Satsuki looked up as Ryuko slid her palms into hers and squeezed gently. Satsuki's hands flexed open for a moment, and Ryuko held in another hiccuping breath as she

waited to see if she would be rejected. Satsuki eventually relaxed into her hands, but did not return her squeeze.

"Will she..." Ryuko gulped. "Will she really kill you?" Satsuki met Ryuko's eyes, then looked away suddenly as the color drained from her face.

"I don't know." Her voice was barely a whisper. "I... She could..." Satsuki pondered it for a while, chewing at her lower lip. Eventually she shrugged, a barely perceptible motion of her shoulders that Ryuko felt through her hands. "Then again killing me would remove any chances to replace her... material." Ryuko winced and withdrew her hands. Satsuki did not stop her. Thinking about the "material" reminded Ryuko how she had invaded Satsuki's most secret life, and holding on to her just felt like a further trespass rather than a comfort.

Ryuko didn't know how to tell Satsuki how desperately she did not want Ragyo to make more material. It didn't feel like something she had a *right* to want. So instead she just said,

"Sorry."

Satsuki gave her a hard look and stood.

"You should be sorry," she said, and it was true. For a moment Ryuko thought Satsuki would offer her her hand to help her up, but instead Satsuki turned away and pointed her face back the way they came. "We'll need to cover our tracks." Satsuki cast an eye over her shoulder at Ryuko. *Do I dare to hope...?* "You didn't... Who saw you at the manor?" Ryuko stood and dusted off her jacket, pausing to make sure nothing had fallen from her backpack on the wild sprint across the street.

"Uh... What are the odds your security guys are snitches?" Satsuki tapped a finger against her own cheek mockingly.

"Hmm... I wonder." The frown that had become a permanent fixture of Satsuki's face deepened. Ryuko figured she didn't need to see the Alps anymore- she'd already seen the world's craggiest mountains in the wrinkles between Satsuki's eyebrows. Satsuki paused for a moment to turn and press her hands against the stone railing, taking a few deep breaths.

"I.." She somewhat resented the need to be vulnerable in front of Ryuko. *Again* . "I have-" Satsuki wondered if she said "coup d'état," Ryuko would understand what that meant. "I have a plan." Satsuki knew it sounded stupid the moment it came out of her mouth.

"A... plan?"

"Yes a *plan*," Satsuki snapped. She took a few more measured breaths. "But," another breath, "Mother also has a plan." Ryuko shuffled to the railing beside Satsuki, mirroring her stance by placing her hands on the cold stone. "And..." Satsuki continued. "Her plan is better than mine." Her voice quieted to barely above a whisper. "She could break me in half with her little finger." Ryuko let out a long, sympathetic sigh.

How can that be possible? Ryuko thought. *This woman is not a bison she can't just break people in half.* Still, she was willing to lean on Satsuki's expertise a little, even if was only because Satsuki had absentmindedly pressed her shoulder into Ryuko's while leaning against the balustrade. Ryuko leaned into her in more ways than one.

"Well..." Ryuko said, finally. "If I can help... I just..." Satsuki looked up at Ryuko, and Ryuko found herself nearly tongue-tied as she struggled to force her feelings-her true, painful feelings- through her teeth and into the air. "I just want to be there for you-with you- I just..." Ryuko could hold Satsuki's eyes no longer, and dipped her chin into the collar of her shirt. "I just want to be wherever you are."

Satsuki moved suddenly, a fire lighting in eyes that had been empty mere seconds ago. She wrapped an arm around Ryuko's neck and

shoulders, holding her firmly, as she gripped her chin with her other hand.

"Matoi Ryuko," her name seemed to fill the whole park as Satsuki boomed into her ear. "You do *not* want to be wherever I am. I will never forgive myself if you go where I go." Ryuko tried to protest, look away, but Satsuki's grip was like iron. "The only reason we, I, any of us, are *here* and *in danger* is because *you* cannot bear to be anywhere I am *not*."

That hurt, and Ryuko couldn't stand it. It was all she could do to even tell Satsuki that she couldn't be apart from her, and Satsuki had rejected her in the strongest terms possible. *Everything I do just hurts her more*, Ryuko thought, and her eyes welled with tears. She tried to run, push Satsuki away, *who needs you anyway?* But Satsuki held her tighter and tighter until eventually her face was pressed between Satsuki's breasts as she wrapped Ryuko into an aggressive hug.

"I'm afraid, Ryuko." It was Satsuki's turn to bare her true feelings, and all she had to share was fear. "I don't-" Satsuki fell silent. She didn't want to encourage Ryuko by telling her she didn't know if she could bear to lose her, either. For a long moment she held Ryuko against her chest, feeling her snuffle into her shirt. Satsuki struggled with the despair rising inside her, yet she was unable to cry alongside Ryuko. So instead she held Ryuko's head, gripping onto her for dear life as her own head tilted towards the sky. Satsuki could not weep-that had been taken from her years ago- so instead her mouth opened in a silent, agonized wail, and she soundlessly screamed her fear into the sky.

I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm so afraid . Satsuki wasn't afraid to die. She wasn't afraid of the cage she lived in. She was afraid Ryuko would be taken from her and turned into something ugly. Something as ugly as her.

She had never invited these shareholders to her *home* before. I'm sure they considered it quite the honor. Ragyo was never certain why she had to look at this group of men with big wallets and tiny cocks. Ah, yes. Because the American state of Delaware required her to meet with her U.S. shareholders once a year.

But today, Ragyo was *very* pleased to see her loyal servants.

This wasn't the first party she'd thrown that weekend, or even that day. Her Indonesian shareholders were here for brunch a few hours ago. France, yesterday evening for cocktails. Ragyo still had several more parties to throw, and she was eager to get through this one.

She didn't *exactly* shake hands with them all. But she did make sure to extend her hand towards each of them before whisking her hand away before they had a chance to put their greasy palms on her flawless silk glove.

Rei had been concerned that they would find it odd to be led to the basement a few hours into drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Ragyo never worried for a second. She didn't even need to drug them. A few strong drinks and they would follow her into the mouth of Charybdis.

Well, more or less.

But first, the reveal. These men shouldn't have to live the rest of their lives without seeing the most beautiful thing in the world. It didn't matter that Ragyo had made the big reveal to all the parties before now. It didn't matter that she would make many other revelations. Her stage was set up on the bottommost floor of the manor, a microphone perched in front of the gigantic double doors.

They were still closed, for now, but soon they would be open, and Ragyo couldn't wait. Ordinarily, she would have slowed down for her speech, pausing to boom on all the right syllables, but she just couldn't *wait* .

"Gentlemen, welcome." They started to clap, but Ragyo did not leave time for applause, and they didn't dare make noise while she was speaking. If you asked any of the men if they believed the Director were a dangerous woman, they would all deny it. "Madam Director? She's a shrewd businesswoman, but I wouldn't say she's dangerous." But the timid way they whispered and shuffled around her belied their true feelings. You would think Ragyo would enjoy their worshipping fear, but she genuinely never thought to wonder about how they felt about her. She would be glad to see them transformed into something holier.

Ragyo clipped through her speech at a brisk pace- loyalty being rewarded, REVOCS expanding, their role in the grand scheme of the universe- they were eating out of the palm of her hand. Ragyo knew the words by heart, so she spared a few seconds to daydream. She wished Satsuki were there to eat out of her hand. She could stain her soft lips red with a ripe strawberry, pressing it against...

Ragyo stumbled over a word, and frowned a little. It's not as if the shareholders even noticed, but she had to be flawless. There would be plenty of time later to think about Satsuki.

... *and Ryuko* . Her lips curled into a smile again as she added Ryuko's name to the end of her thought. She wasn't accustomed to having another girl to think about. It was a strange feeling, but decisively pleasant. She would have wondered how Soichiro managed to hide her all those years, but such a thought strayed dangerously close to forcing her to admit she had underestimated him. So her mind slid over that unpleasant thought and turned to her deep contempt for her late husband.

Soichiro was a fool . Now her contempt held a new layer of resentment. He had taken away her right to raise her daughter, to be there for her through her childhood. And for *what*? So he could hide in a hole for two more decades and die a pathetic death anyway? Ragyo's emotions rose, and added that punch to her speech she was lacking. She finished with a flourish.

"... and we shall rise, just as I have promised! Do you accept?" Finally, she paused for applause. Those sad, weak men clapped wildly, filling the acoustic chamber with thunder. Ragyo slowly raised her arms, and her servants scrambled to open the doors behind her at the exact same pace she lifted her hands.

"Behold"

The Original Life Fiber pulsed behind her, open and ready to accept offerings. The insides of its two mouths burned white-orange against its dull red outsides, and the men gasped and murmured. A few of them backed away, but it was already too late. Before anyone could scream, tendrils snapped out of the slitted mouths to grasp its human feed. Screams turned to moans as the threads sapped the strength from their victims and drew them inside.

It was a scene Ragyo had seen a dozen times. Still, all she could do was laugh.

It was Satsuki's turn to drag Ryuko behind her by the hand.

Their tender moment had been interrupted by the sound of something wooden being absolutely ripped apart. The sound of splintering wood reverberating through the streets into the small park had sounded like a giant splitting a tree's trunk with their bare hands.

Well, not necessarily a giant. Just someone with terrifying, omnipotent strength. Satsuki was familiar with such a person, and she wasn't fond of her. She certainly didn't trust her to keep things PG with Mako. So in a second she whirled Ryuko around in her arms and yanked her by the wrist, dashing back the way they came.

Satsuki gasped for air as she ran, and not only from effort. She hadn't expected them to find her so soon, and realizing she'd wasted all her time to prepare by napping in a stranger's house and sucking on a paparazzi's face made her feel like a fool. Like an impulsive idiot who has to think with her junk because her only two brain cells

are occupied with trying to squeak together fast enough to make a fire.

If I were such an idiot, what would I be like? Satsuki turned briefly to look at Ryuko, who had caught up to her but had refused to let go of her hand. She managed to look Ryuko up and down before she had to turn back to look where she was going. *Yes, exactly like that .*

It had been a mistake to run out of the house without taking note of the streets, and Satsuki would have found herself lost inside the narrow maze of roads without the groaning and shredding of wood and cement to guide her.

"What *is* that?" Ryuko shouted over the scream of bending rebar. It sounded like a demolition, but Satsuki's reaction had a spike of dread throbbing in her stomach. Satsuki didn't answer her, but as they turned a corner Ryuko could see for herself. The door to Mako's house had been ripped off the hinges and half of the house sagged as though the foundations inside had been pulled apart. Ryuko nearly stopped, dumbfounded. *What the fuck?*

Satsuki charged ahead, immediately furious. The doorway was black, hidden in shadow from the sagging frame. She barely slowed, but held her arms out to grip the frame as she entered to keep Ryuko from heading inside first.

I'll pull that goblin's head off if she's hurt Mako. Really, Nui?

Satsuki's eyes struggled to see through the swirling clouds of dust, but an electric spark shot up her spine nonetheless. A warning. Satsuki gasped and threw herself backwards, still holding on to the doorframe to keep from tumbling back from the force of her throw. Her elbow smashed into Ryuko's throat, and the girl choked audibly.

Satsuki felt something tug at her pants, and the button clasp the fabric around her waist ripped off so forcefully it buried itself inches deep into the ruined remains of the door. A purple flash of lighting cut the air up from her waist to her nose, slicing through Satsuki's shirt

and zipping threateningly over her skin. The blade caught on the clasp of her bra between her breasts, but nearly instantly ripped through, taking a patch of skin with it. Satsuki tossed her head back to avoid the swing, but she could not avoid the blinding light of a camera's flash as Nui casually withdrew her blade and snapped a photo.

"Helllooooo Kiki" Nui drawled. Satsuki wasn't sure how she managed to drawl a name with two short syllables and two hard K's, but it was insufferable. Nui winked at her, but with her eyepatch it looked like she was just blinking. She peeked around Satsuki's shoulder, pulling a face like she was about to coo at a baby, and dangled the cell phone she'd just used to take Satsuki's picture. "Oooooo hewwo Ryuko. Cute phone."

Satsuki knew better than to take a swipe at the phone, but Ryuko didn't. Growling, she lunged to take her phone out of Nui's hand, and was met with the device smashing at blistering speed into her face. It struck her mouth so hard the snug black and red case popped clean off, and Ryuko barely managed to catch the phone in an instinctive clutch at her bleeding lip.

"That one's on me, sweetheart." Nui folded her arms behind her back and smiled sweetly as Ryuko struggled to force her stinging eyes to focus on the screen. "Allthoouugh. You do owe me *quite* a few of those."

Seeing the picture on her cell phone reminded her Satsuki was in fact a famous fashionista, and her hands started to sweat as the evil gremlin part of her brain screamed at her about how much she could make selling it. The photo captured Satsuki stepping through the doorway, her hands clutching either side of the doorway and eyes snapping in surprise as she twisted away from Nui's knife. Ryuko gawked artlessly at the smooth lines of Satsuki's stomach framed through the flaps of her bisected shirt and plunging down into the V of her buttonless pants zipper. Ryuko suddenly realized why Satsuki's apartment was filled with kale and yogurt, and she could

barely pull her attention away from her pictured abs long enough to recognize Nui was talking again.

"You know, Kiki, as your handler I had considered the possibility that some deranged paparazzi might find a way to get their grubby hands on you, but this comes as such a *shock* anyway." Nui turned her single unblinking eye to Ryuko. "So, how did you do it?"

"How did I wh-"

"-did you take her into the park so no one could hear her scream?" Ryuko gaped helplessly, her hands falling to her sides. Nui noticed and smiled. "It was a good idea, but let me tell you. Totally unnecessary. She's quiet as a corpse." Nui effortlessly dodged a heated swipe from Satsuki while crossing her arms over her shoulders, a crude pantomime of a mummy. "I think I've developed a necrophilia fetish because of her." Nui backed further into Mako's house, shrouding her face in shadow until her eye seemed to glow in the dim light. "You could have violated her on... say... that chair," she pointed, "and no one would have even noticed."

The fact that she had in fact violated Satsuki-although not in the way Nui implied-in that very chair was not lost on Ryuko. Paranoia crept up Ryuko's scalp and she began to lose control of her hot, gulping breaths.

Was she here the entire time?

"Kiki, how will mother take it that you lost your virginity to the first random creep to kidnap you?"

"My WHAT?" Satsuki boomed louder than necessary, accusal implicit in her tone. Though perhaps it was necessary, because her shout seemed to deflate Nui, if only a tiny bit.

"Awwwww Kiki don't be upset." She shouldn't have been close enough to touch Satsuki, but Nui reached out and out until she could press

the blade of her finger against Satsuki's lips. "Hush, baby. I don't mean nothin'."

"I DIDN'T FUCK HER" Ryuko blurted out with utter artlessness, distracting Satsuki and Nui long enough for the tension between them to dissipate. Nui giggled, though the laugh sounded more like a pulsing blender than anything else.

"Oh you didn't did you?" Nui seemed to turn herself inside out, suddenly flipping so her back was to them without ever turning around. She peered back over her shoulder and licked her lips. "I find that hard to believe. The only reason I would break into someone's house would be to fuck someone inside." Somehow, she looked both of them up and down simultaneously, and Ryuko could feel chills starting in the small of her back. Satsuki rolled her eyes.

"Yes, yes, it's always with the 'fucking' with you," Satsuki sighed, treating her ruined shirt like a cardigan by crossing each half across her chest and folding her arms over it. Nui didn't appreciate the dismissiveness of Satsuki's comment.

"Yes, yes," she mocked, imitating Satsuki's exact tone, "It's always with the 'don't fuck me' with you." Nui returned to her usual high liting, "Well, my question is, which one of us usually ends up on top?" Nui's voice deepened again, but this time in threat, "And which one of us usually ends up with her ass bent over the kitchen counter when she can't just shut her mouth and look pretty?"

Ryuko blanched at the ever-escalating barbs, but the fact that Satsuki seemed utterly unperturbed soothed her. Ryuko feigned a squeak and hid behind Satsuki, using the moment to slide her scissor out of her backpack and into her back pocket.

Satsuki sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, gesturing with the blade of her hand like she was calmly attempting to make a point during a contentious university seminar.

"Nui, if you think YOU are the one who 'usually ends up on top,' you're more delusional than I ever thought possible." Satsuki seemed to soften, if only for a moment. "You and I really should be in this together."

"Huh? In what together? Who have you been in?" Ryuko peeked around Satsuki's shoulder just in time to watch her fingers strangle her own arms for a second before they relaxed back into the crooks of her elbows. "I thought you just said you haven't been in that thing." From the tilt of Nui's head in her direction, Ryuko could tell "that thing" was her. "Buuuuutttt..." Nui seemed to be everywhere at once. Leaning against the bathroom door, perched on the couch, twirling in the center of the room, and finally, a few inches from Ryuko's face. "Kiki, dear, I would LOVE to be in that thing together with you."

Satsuki's eyes widened, and she whirled around and suddenly gripped Ryuko around the waist. For a brief, hot second, Ryuko thought Satsuki intended to follow up on Nui's advice, and she grabbed at Satsuki's shoulders to shove her away.

"Don't move, Matoi!" Satsuki barked, and Ryuko felt the arms around her hips tremble and clench tighter. Ryuko felt the hot breath of a silent laugh ghost past her ear, and her back instinctively arched as she realized Nui had moved behind her.

She felt the sting of something sharp against her inner thigh. Ryuko looked down to see that Nui had threaded a blade between her thighs, the sharp edge millimeters away from gashing her open. Nui had angled the blade upwards to keep her from stepping over it, and had pressed the tip into the bottom of the V made by Satsuki's undone zipper. The blade trembled, and Ryuko felt it catch the inner seam of her jeans, scraping it roughly from side to side in some obscene metaphor. Ryuko ventured a peek over her shoulder, and saw Satsuki's white knuckles gripping the odd circle of the knife's hilt, holding it down and away from Ryuko's crotch even as Nui inched it upwards.

Ryuko shuddered as Nui laid a few sloppy kisses on the nape of her neck, arching onto the tips of her toes for more space. She stared down, breathing hard, focused on the shuddering circles the tip of the knife traced into Satsuki's stomach as Satsuki and Nui struggled for control. Ryuko felt a tug at the seat of her pants, and she half expected them to be pulled down around her ankles. The reality was worse.

"I wondered where this thing went off to!" Nui cackled directly into Ryuko's ear, guffawing so close there could be no doubt about whether it was on purpose or not. "That old goat just couldn't keep it in his pants long enough to hide it."

"What are you talking about?" Satsuki groaned, sweat dampening the dark wisps of new hair that grew around her ears. Nui did not respond. She only laughed louder and louder, her voice reaching a fevered pitch. Nui suddenly forced her blade all the way to the ground, tearing it free from Satsuki's grip and letting it clang carelessly on what was left of Mako's linoleum. Just as quickly, she forced the blade up again, and Ryuko gasped as she expected to be cleaved in two. But Nui had flipped the blade before she smashed it between Ryuko's legs, so only the flat of the knife cracked into her pelvis.

Ryuko had always assumed she would never have to suffer the indignity of being kicked in the balls, but when Nui's blade smashed directly against her clit, all the balls she had kicked in her life started to flash before her eyes.

I'm sorry, oh god, I'm so sorry. Ryuko gripped mindlessly at Satsuki's shirt, crumpling into her chest with a wordless, burbling groan. The pain seemed to shoot all the way up into her heart, and she could already read the headlines: "Woman found dead from massive heart attack after suffering extreme genital trauma." Before she could recover, Nui planted a heeled foot into the small of her back and shoved, sending them both sailing into the house.

Ryuko landed on top of Satsuki, pushing her into the couch so hard the springs broke and the couch folded around them. Satsuki found herself actually inside the couch, her knees gathered up to her chest from being forced inside the hole between the cushions. She struggled to move quickly, react quickly, to do anything at all, but the broken couch and Ryuko's limp body on top of her kept her from moving. Satsuki flitted her eyes around the room, knowing it was the only way she had a chance to catch Nui's flitting movements.

For once, though, Nui stayed still. Even rarer, she stayed silent. Satsuki glared bitterly at her as Nui put on a show, flourishing her blade and the blade she had stolen from Ryuko's back pocket together in intricate patterns. Satsuki first thought the two oddly-shaped knives were separate colors, red and purple, but seeing them together made her realize they had always been the same purply-red color and only appeared different by virtue of their separation. Satsuki fought back frustrated tears-tears she hated herself for-as Nui crimped the blades together into a pair of giant scissors.

"Ta-daaaa!" Nui proclaimed, finally holding the scissors aloft. Satsuki's eyes widened, and she struggled to free an arm from the couch. "Ooh, Kiki want a closer look?" Nui brandished the scissors and stalked Satsuki slowly, circling nearer and nearer for no other reason than to scare her. Satsuki resented the attempt, but knew better than to scoff.

Not when she was like this.

Nui turned her back, and as soon as she did Satsuki began to wiggle furiously, frantic to extricate her arms from the couch and her legs from Ryuko. Nui snipped her new scissors in the air, taking apparent joy in the sound the blades made as they clicked together. "Whoopsie!" She crowed, disingenuously, as she snipped through the door frame with all the effort of cutting a dandelion stem. The ceiling immediately crumbled, chunks of cheap plywood and fiberglass insulation quickly blocking the only exit.

Satsuki's elbow was caught in a spring, the sharp metal tearing into her flesh whenever she tried to pull free. Satsuki gasped as she arched her back repeatedly, struggling to force Ryuko off of her body by pressing into her with her chest. The motion roused Ryuko, and she slowly began to come to. Too slowly.

"Ryuko! Ryuko!" Satsuki called Ryuko's name, abandoning her attempt to escape without Nui noticing. Nui stared at her with a fascinated expression, turning away from the door to circle her again.

Fuck.

Satsuki bit her lip and prepared to rip her tendons out of her arm to escape. She had never been presented with the opportunity to mutilate herself for her freedom before, but she had always told herself she would do it, if necessary. Satsuki tested the spring again, just in case it decided to release her. It did not, so she took a deep breath and...

" *Satsuki*," a warm hand wrapped around her wrist, and Satsuki realized Mako had wormed herself under the couch before they arrived. She didn't know if she had hidden or if Nui had chased her there, but regardless, she was there. Satsuki felt a flood of relief, followed immediately by the stress of having another person to protect. She dearly hoped Nui didn't know where Mako was.

Satsuki continued to control her facial expressions, feigning subsuming interest in Nui's slow stalk. Every once in a while, Nui reached out to snip something in half-a lamp, a chair, a portrait of Mako's parents. It would have been funny under different circumstances, watching Nui walk around the room snipping furniture in half with a pair of comically large scissors. Without moving any other parts of her body, Satsuki pressed a single finger into Mako's palm and dragged out large, deliberate letters.

Mako squeezed her hand, and Satsuki hoped that meant she understood. Ryuko was moving again, and, suddenly, she shook herself free of whatever stupor she had fallen into. Ryuko sat up in Satsuki's lap with just enough time to look her in the eyes before she was forced forward by a blow to the back of the neck. Nui had opened the scissors almost as wide as they would go and jammed the knot where the blades connected into the back of Ryuko's head. Gleefully, she forced the blades into the back of the couch so both Ryuko and Satsuki were pinned by their necks against the furniture. Sighing dramatically, Nui perched on the couch next to them as if to make small talk at a brunch get-together.

Nui went to wrap her arm around Satsuki's shoulders, realized Satsuki's shoulders were inside the couch, and settled for idly stroking her hair. Satsuki's head was craned away from Nui, forced to the side by Ryuko's face pressed against hers, so she allowed herself to bare her teeth at the contact.

"Girls, I've had a wonderful time with you today," Nui sighed, twirling a piece of Satsuki's hair up against Ryuko's cheek, "But I can't help feeling like I've interrupted something between the two of you." Nui leaned in and rubbed her face against both of theirs, nuzzling Ryuko's cheek and pausing to leave a hickey at the base of Satsuki's neck. Using the moment of distraction, Satsuki frantically pinched the back of Mako's hand, desperate to get her instruction across.

"Get your filthy mouth off of me!" Satsuki shouted, thrashing to make the couch groan as much as possible to conceal the sound of Mako forcing open the spring that held her arm. Nui blinked, frowning.

"Kiki? Just because you found a new girl doesn't mean all our time together means nothing!" Nui grabbed them both by the hair on the napes of their necks, and Ryuko screamed as Nui craned her head backwards. "Don't worry, I know how it is, new love. When you first start you just can't keep your hands off each other!" Still holding them both, Nui lowered herself so her eye was level with their mouths, watching intently. "Let me see."

Ryuko shook her head, growling and desperate to be free from Nui's iron grip, but she could not escape as Nui forced her mouth against Satsuki's. Ryuko figured she would rather die than be forced to smooch for Nui's amusement, but she quickly became overwhelmed as Satsuki kissed her passionately. Satsuki pressed a few tender kisses to the corner of Ryuko's mouth to soothe her, then immediately pressed her tongue into her mouth. Ryuko gasped, surprised, but returned the attention tentatively. She wanted to fall into Satsuki, let herself go completely and enjoy the feeling of her lips and gently swirl her tongue around Satsuki's, but Nui's exclamations were... a bit much.

Shortly, Nui's coos and sighs turned Ryuko off. WAY way off. Ryuko started to squirm, but the grip in her hair only tightened as Nui's bulging eye inched closer and closer. Ryuko tried to close her eyes and enjoy herself-Satsuki continued to mack on, totally unfazed-but Nui was one inch away from her face and she felt like all she could breathe in was Nui's panting air. Ryuko started to resent Satsuki for trapping her in this never-ending lip lock.

God, Satsuki. Fuck.

Ryuko struggled to gather her legs beneath her, her knees crooked at awkward angles in the soggy softness of the ruined couch. She managed to press a foot to an arm of the couch, and pushed. She felt the armrest start to tear away as her thigh trembled with effort. Just as Ryuko took an inch of space back from Nui's hand and went to pull away, Satsuki's eyes shot open. Satsuki's eyes took hers as urgently as if she had grabbed her hand, then softened into a lazy, heated gaze. Ryuko paused from tearing herself away just long enough for Satsuki to gently grasp Ryuko's lower lip between her teeth. She gasped as Satsuki's teeth rolled over the tender skin beneath her lip.

Ryuko could not tear her eyes away from Satsuki's, but she could *feel* Nui's eye dilate. Satsuki finally turned her eyes to Nui, and Ryuko felt the broken connection like a sudden rush of cold air.

Satsuki fixed Nui with that same tenderness she had just bestowed upon Ryuko. Like Ryuko, Nui paused, transfixed. Satsuki's grip on Ryuko's lip suddenly shifted from soft to businesslike. Satsuki tossed her chin back, forcing Ryuko's head back with a sharp tug of her lip. Ryuko screamed, pushing harder against the couch, and their faces finally came apart. The air felt freezing against Ryuko's burning cheek as her skin pulled away from Satsuki's.

Something black and sharp stabbed past Ryuko's face, startling her into throwing her head back even further. A hot, wet spray erupted against her face and neck, soaking her hair and filling her ear. Nui and Ryuko screamed at the same time, Ryuko finally forcing the scissors out of the couch and tumbling to the floor.

Nui's shriek rose to a frenzied pitch as she clawed at her one remaining eye. The white handle of a black blade jutted from her skull, blood dripping from the tip of the hilt like a bloody nose. Nui ripped the knife free and immediately rocketed it back towards Satsuki, but her aim was sloppy, and Satsuki batted it out of the air like a bear.

Satsuki shook herself free of the couch and advanced on Nui without an instant of hesitation. She wrapped her hands around Nui's neck and squeezed so hard the tendons in her forearms stood out like hot iron rods. Nui choked desperately, but still sounded somewhat sarcastic, so Satsuki squeezed harder and harder until her fingers bruised black.

Ryuko surely would have been fixated by Satsuki's roiling muscles had she been paying any attention. She held the joined scissors before her face, but her violently shaking hands quickly shuddered the blades apart. The two blades-once again obviously different colors-clattered to the cheap carpet as Ryuko's arms went limp.

That's my father's scissor blade.

Her eyes flicked over to Nui, whose face was in the middle of transitioning from purple to black, and grit her teeth until she tasted

blood. A flood of blistering emotion filled Ryuko, washing away any words and replacing them with a dull roar.

"You BITCH!"

She staggered to her feet, her hand somehow finding her half of the scissors. Ryuko launched at Nui, body slamming both her and Satsuki to the floor. Satsuki's grip on Nui's throat loosened, and Ryuko just caught the garbled foreign phrase that Satsuki had so desperately tried to keep inside Nui.

"Mon-Mignon Prêt-à-Porter"

"Fuck," Satsuki said, reaching out to grab Ryuko and pull her to her chest. But it was too late, and they were forcibly separated by a sudden crush of bodies. It was like someone shook up and suddenly uncorked a carbonated bottle of mosh pit. Ryuko bounced against Mako's table twice before being forced against the kitchen window, every inch of her skin touching some part of Nui's multiple bodies, crushed against that freezing papery flesh. Ryuko screamed and screamed, her rage turning from panic to fear back to rage.

The house screamed along with Ryuko, the ruined building suddenly filled to the bursting. Ryuko gasped as she felt the wall beneath her crumble, and the crushing force of a thousand Nui's rolled her into the street.

Ryuko never let go of her scissor blade. It seemed to grow in her hand, feeding on her furious fixation. The second she rolled to her feet, she brought the blade down in a sweeping red arc, screaming one word:

"BIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITCH"